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ABSTRACT

A portion of Mississippi Choctaw culture commonly referred to as "material culture" is described with pictures illustrating the process of making some of the traditional Choctaw items which tribal members have chosen to continue to make. The secondary textbook may be used as a supplement to the state-adopted textbook for the course titled "Mississippi History" (a major resource material for a unit of study in the social studies curriculum offered at the secondary level) or with a secondary-level arts and crafts program, especially if the unit is about arts and crafts native to Mississippi. The language in the text of the interviews is substantially the same as it was stated, therefore responses are not written in perfect English. Traditional Choctaw items described by tribal members are constructing the stickball and rabbit sticks, drum making, preparing hominy, making cane and oak baskets, learning to do beadwork, and sewing Choctaw clothing. It is recommended that the teacher's manual (RC 013 896) be used with this booklet. (ERB)

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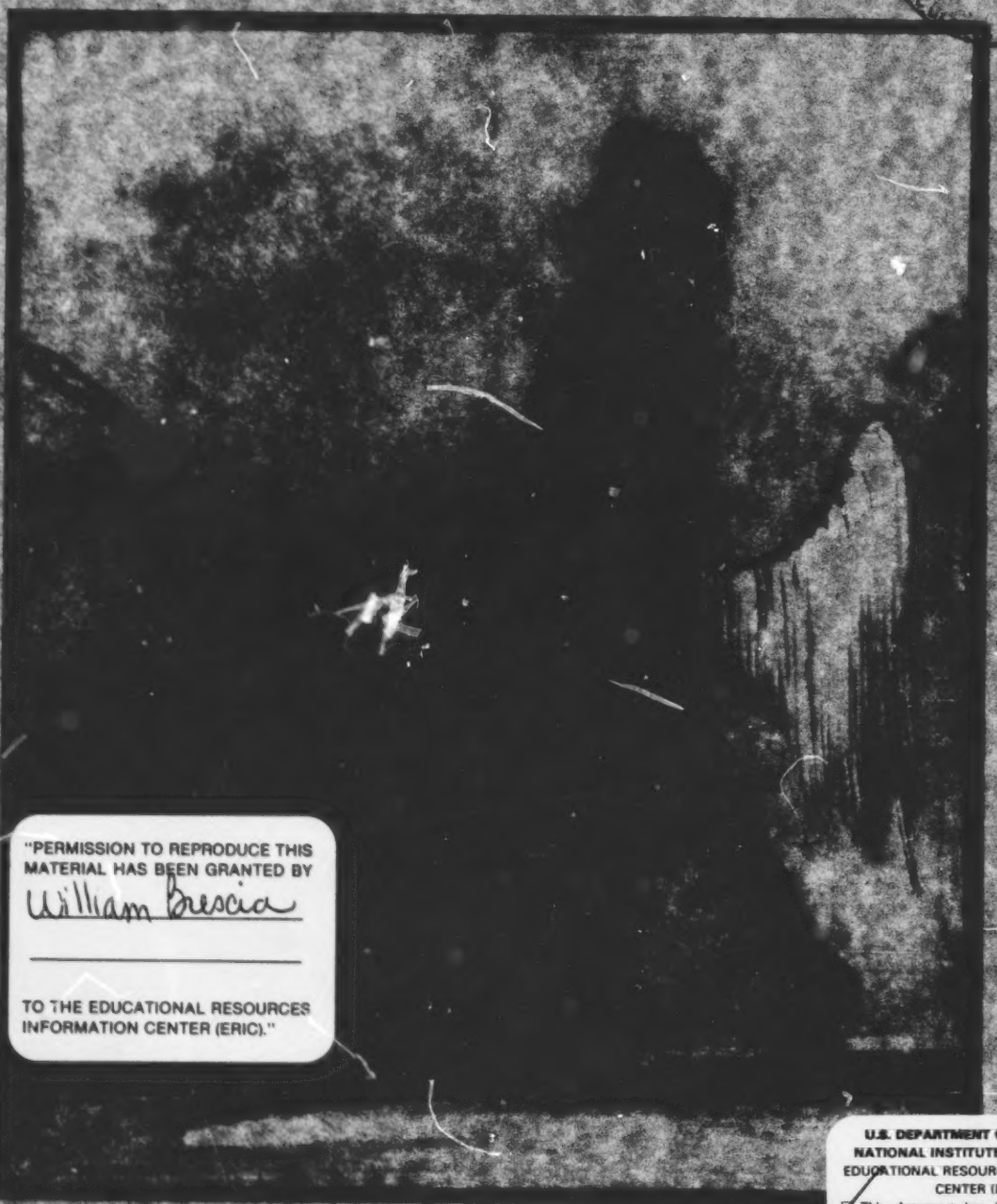

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BY THE WORK OF OUR HANDS: Choctaw Material Culture

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Thanks to all the special people who accepted us into their homes and lives to interview and photograph them. Without their help and patience this book would not be possible. Also thanks to Edward John and Marvin Anderson, who did such great work developing and printing the photos, and to Doyle Tubby for answering a lot of questions.

Special acknowledgment to Marian Isaac, who conducted most of the interviews in Choctaw and then translated them into English. Her persistence and ability to talk freely with the interviewees was instrumental in making this book possible.

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TO RAHKA AND MISTY

I shall die but you will return to our brethren. As you go along the paths, you will see flowers and hear the birds sing. . .

Pushmataha

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Preface

The reader should be aware that this book only covers that portion of Choctaw culture commonly referred to as "material culture." As with any society culture is much more complex than reflected by its material culture. The informatin in this book is no more reflective of Choctaw culture as a whole than baseball is reflective of American culture as a whole.

The material culture items discussed in this book represent some of the traditional Choctaw items which tribal members have chosen to continue to make. Life on the Choctaw Reservation is quite similar to life elsewhere in rural Mississippi. The Choctaw live in frame and brick houses that look like homes all over the United States. The Choctaw Medical Center is one of the most modern in the area and provides medical, dental, optical, and mental health services to the tribe. Two factories located on the reservation provide steady employment for tribal members and local non-Choctaws. Choctaw students attend elementary school in their local communities and continue their education at Choctaw Central High School. Choctaw Central has a program much like any other high school in Mississippi, offering general classes, college prep courses, and extracurricular activities. Many of the Choctaw attend college today. A large number of the college graduates return to the reservation for employment after graduation.

The reader should note that the language in the text is substantially the same as it was stated to us during the interviews. Some of the responses are not written in "perfect English." We did not want to make great changes in the language because we felt it would change the flavor of the responses. In everyday speech, hardly anyone speaks "perfect English," and the same holds true for the people interviewed.

This book is not meant to be the definitive work on Choctaw material culture. In fact, only a few items are included in the book because of space limitations. Nor is each item dealt with in its totality. We hope that the reader will seek other resources for more complete information. We also hoped that more attention will be focused on the Choctaw tribe by scholars and writers in the future.

NOTE: The accompayning *Teacher's Manual* should be used along with this book. For more information about the tribe see *Tribal Government* the other book in this series and *We Are Choctaw*; both are available by writing to the tribal address in the front of this book.

Bill Brescia
Carolyn Reeves
June, 1982

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Stickball and Rabbit Sticks

Jackson Isaac was born in the Choctaw community which now is called Pearl River. When he was growing up, it was called Biavsa, which means "berries." He went to school in Chilocco, Oklahoma, for awhile, then came home when both his father and mother got sick. Because he was away from home, his Choctaw cultural education was delayed until his late teens. He told us about many aspects of Choctaw culture.

WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO MAKE STICKBALL AND RABBIT STICKS?

Ancestors; ancestors handed the knowledge down from one generation to the next generation. I learned from my grandpa, uncle, and father.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO MAKE STICKBALL AND RABBIT STICKS?

Well, if you have a good timber, about 8 hours.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU LEARNED TO MAKE THESE THINGS?

About 17 years old.

DID YOU WANT TO LEARN, OR DID SOMEONE WANT YOU TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE STICKBALL AND RABBIT STICKS?

You need to look at the culture as a whole. Grandpa had ball games all the time, so if they didn't make ball sticks they couldn't play. We were all together as a family, and when he was making the sticks, Grandpa showed us how. That is how it was passed down. The family has been broken up and our culture has been cut down a whole lot. We used to only wear Choctaw clothes, but today we've lost that. We have lost some of the culture

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and it's going to take a long time to bring it back—that is, if we are going to bring it back.

WHY DID THEY TEACH YOU TO MAKE THESE THINGS?

Well, they don't want this culture and tradition to fade away. In the last 50 years, this young generation has gotten away from our culture, so they don't have any culture and tradition. They don't practice their culture. There's a few that can make a ball stick [The term "ball stick" refers to the same thing as the term "stickball"] and rabbit sticks and everything like that. My daddy made a ball stick and rabbit stick, and another family over there made the same thing. A lot of them make a Choctaw drum.

DID SCHOOLS EVER PUNISH THE CHOCTAW FOR SPEAKING CHOCTAW?

Yes, some people were punished. Then, a lot of Choctaws asked me what to do. I'm old enough, I was about 20 or 22 years old—and I told the teachers, "You can't change the native tongue because you're not God. God give us our language, so we're going to keep it."

AFTER HUNTING, DID THE CHOCTAW EVER TRADE THE MEAT WITH OTHER CHOCTAW?

No, Choctaw hunted together and divided among each other so there wasn't any left to sell, or trade, because there would be about four or five families living together to eat the rabbits.

DID YOU EVER GO HUNTING WITH WHITES?

Yeah, they hunted with us and at that time it was a free country. Now they call it a free country, but it isn't, because there are too many laws telling people what not to do.

DID YOU EVER MAKE STICKBALL STICKS OR RABBIT STICKS AND SELL THEM TO THE NON-CHOCTAW?

Yes, lots of people used to buy stickball sticks and they played with us in a game. Some of them were good players. They learned how to play and all that, but now they are all old people. A few are living around here; one living here is about 90 years old.

HOW LONG DOES A RABBIT STICK LAST?

If you take care of it right, it won't break. It will last.

IS THERE A CORRECT WAY TO THROW THE RABBIT STICK?

Yes, if you are going to exhibit, there is a certain way to stand and a certain way to throw. But if you are chasing a rabbit, you don't have time to; you have to throw it, run, and throw it—it doesn't make any difference. You can also use the sticks to reach under limbs and knock them down.

HOW MUCH DO THE RABBIT STICKS COST?

It's about $5.00 a set; there are three in a set.

DO MOST CHOCTAW FAMILIES STILL HAVE RABBIT STICKS?

Yeah, they got rabbit sticks but they don't make them to use. They make them for exhibiting at the Choctaw Fair. The ones they make are just a cut limb, with some shaved off to hold on to, and that is all. We used to spend more time making them. They got a good drawknife, cut the timber to size, and smoothed the wood with sandpaper.

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, WERE THERE CERTAIN RULES SET FOR YOU?

Yes, the girls and boys, they had rules. You had to get permission from your parents to go to a dance or somewhere. We used to go together in groups and dance through the night. When I got older, about 18 years old, if

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I wanted to go see my aunt, or my future daddy-in-law, my grandpa gave me permissior every Saturday morning, but I had to be back exactly before sundown Sunday. So, I go down there and stay. About Sunday afternoon I head on back. Then, the next time I want to go somewhere I get permission easy. If I don't do what they say, I had a hard time to get permission.

DID YOUR GRANDPARENTS HAVE A FARM?

Yes, they had cows and hogs. I remember if they belong to you, you cut the ears off so you'll know that is your hog—brand them. They raised cotton and corn. Cotton is a cash crop, then corn, peas, potatoes, and canes for getting the syrup—everything coming out of the field, filling up the crib. When hog-killing time comes, you got the meat, so you don't have to go out and buy meat. They had their own smokehouse.

WHERE DO YOU FIND THE MATERIALS TO MAKF RABBIT STICKS AND STICKBALL STICKS?

For rabbit sticks, anywhere in the woods. But for the ball clubs you can't find timber much; cause the timber run out. The hickory is good, but you know lots of them have knots in the wood. You can't use that. You have to have plain, straight grain.

HOW MUCH DO STICKBALL STICKS COST?

Things were cheaper. We made ball sticks and sold them for a dollar, sometimes 50¢ complete. Now they sell it to you for about $20.00/$25.00, and it's not complete; they will sell a complete set to you for $50.00. What I mean by complete is that you got to have this deer hide to put the band and they can adjust it.

HOW LONG DOES A STICKBALL STICK LAST?

If you play right it will last you a long time, but if you play rough it won't last.

WHY DO SOME PLAYERS HAVE PAINTED DESIGNS ON THEIR STICKBALL STICKS?

Yes, some people put extensive designs on their sticks and sometimes they just paint it black; I painted mine like that. Lots of players do that so they will know their design, and that way they won't lose their sticks.

WERE PREDICTIONS EVER MADE ABOUT STICKBALL GAMES?

Today we play for a certain amount of time. We used to play until the first team scored 12 times, no matter how long it took. Before a game, the prophets would get together and one would say, I only have one; the next prophet would say, I have only three—that would make four—and another would say, I have two—that makes six; and another added three—that is nine; and another had only one, which is a total of ten scores. Well, because that is not enough to win, that team would not play because the prophets said they would lose, and the game would be put off till morning. In the morning, the prophets came together again, and this time it would add up to 12. Then they would play. That's our tradition.

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Cecil Dixon, another artisan, spent almost four hours looking for just the right hickory with which to make ballsticks. Here he starts by quartering the log.

After the bark is pulled off, the basic shape of the stick is roughed out.

Many times during the process it is necessary to trim and shave the wood to get the correct thickness and smoothness before bending the wood.

A draw knife is used to shape and center the handle and to thin the cup enough so that it can be bent. The outside of the stick is always the outside of the ballstick; if bent the other way, the wood will crack.

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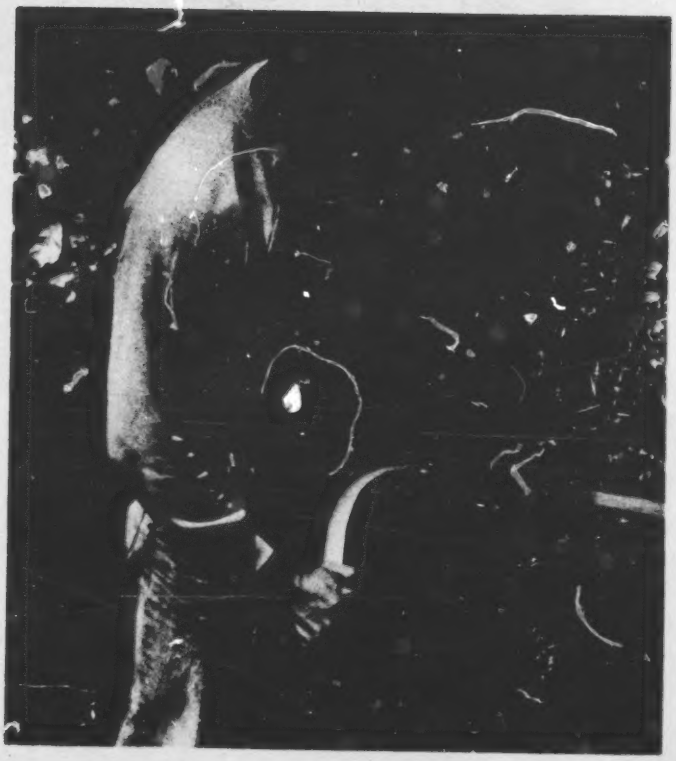

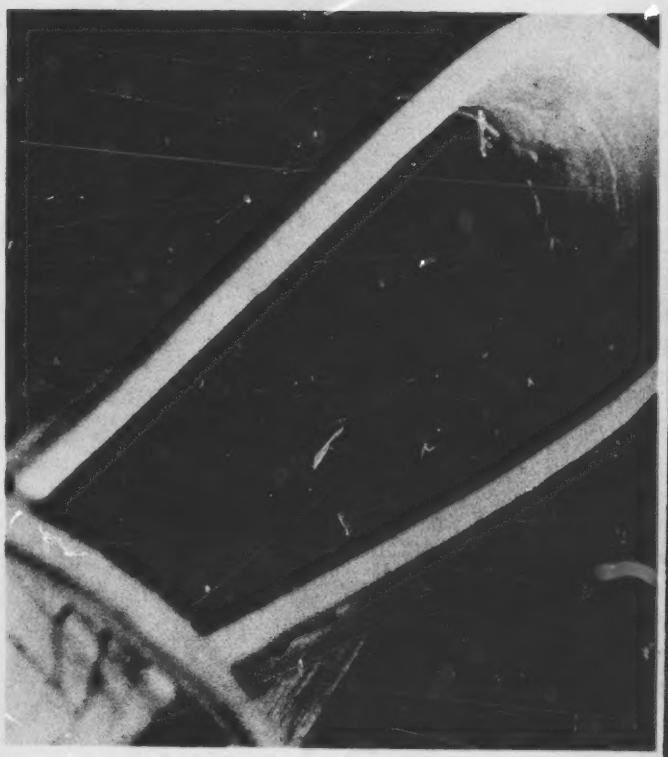

After the cup is bent it is tied in place with strips of bark. Making ballsticks is a delicate process. There are several points during the process where the wood might split and ruin the stick. As shown in the last picture, the top is starting to split.

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After soaking in water, the cup is coated with grease and heated to prepare it for widening. If this isn't done right, the wood will break. All the shavings and chips from the sticks are used in the fire.

At just the right moment, hot but not burning, the wood is stretched over a pointed log, then forced wider open.

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After the bending is finished, a final shaving is required to make the cup wider and to smooth rough edges.

Next, holes are made for the strips of hide. Cecil heats a metal rod, the point of which easily pierces through the cup.

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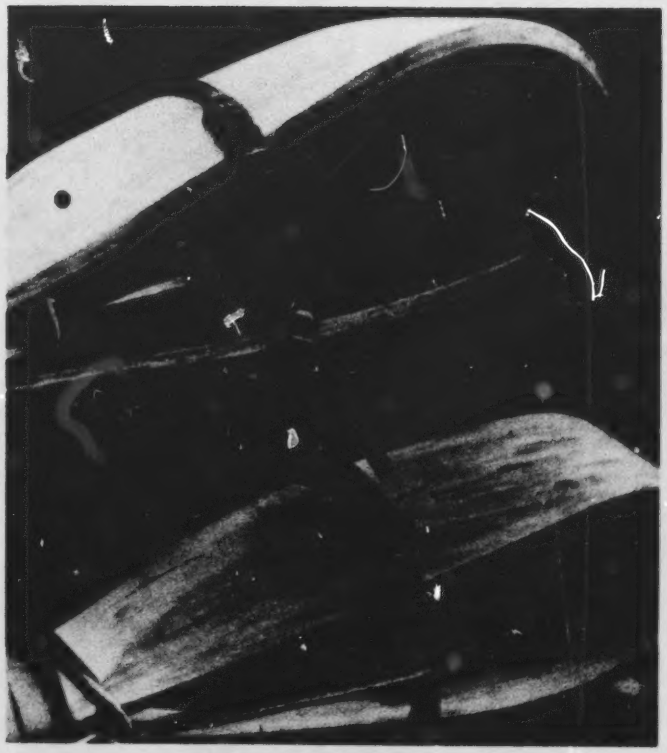

Finally, the cup is bound with hide to hold it in place, and the cup is strung to hold the ball.

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Three pieces of hickory are picked out and cut to the right length, using a traditional Choctaw chain saw.

Once the right length is cut, all but the top few inches of bark is whittled off. If a stick is too wide, an ax is used to get it down to whittling size.

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All the bark and the first layer of wood are removed to make the stick comfortable for holding.

The inner bark is smoothed out, and the loose bark scraped off.

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The stick is trimmed to remove sharp edges.

A hole approximately one-half inch deep is gouged in the end of one of the rabbit sticks, and a screw is put in the wood to hold the lead that will make this stick heavier. Cecil said his father taught him to do this. Most rabbit sticks do not have lead in the end.

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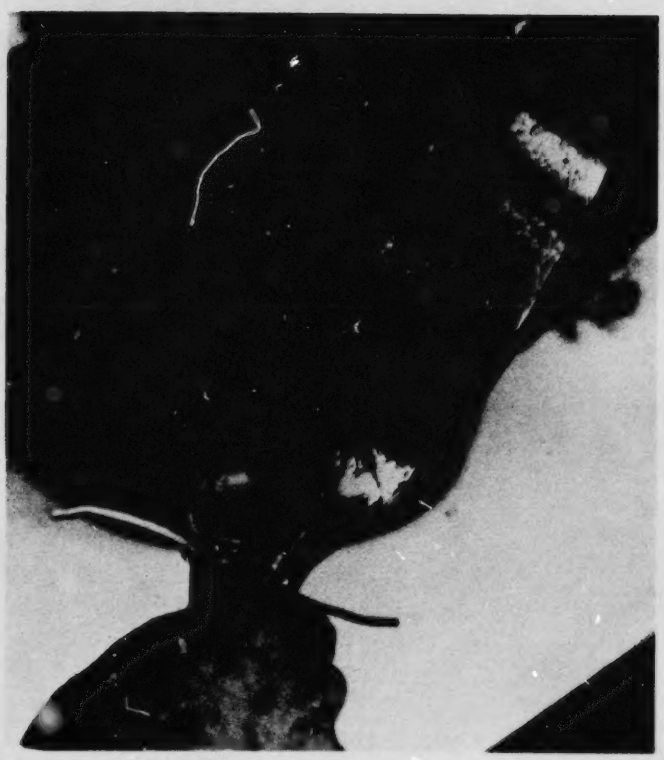
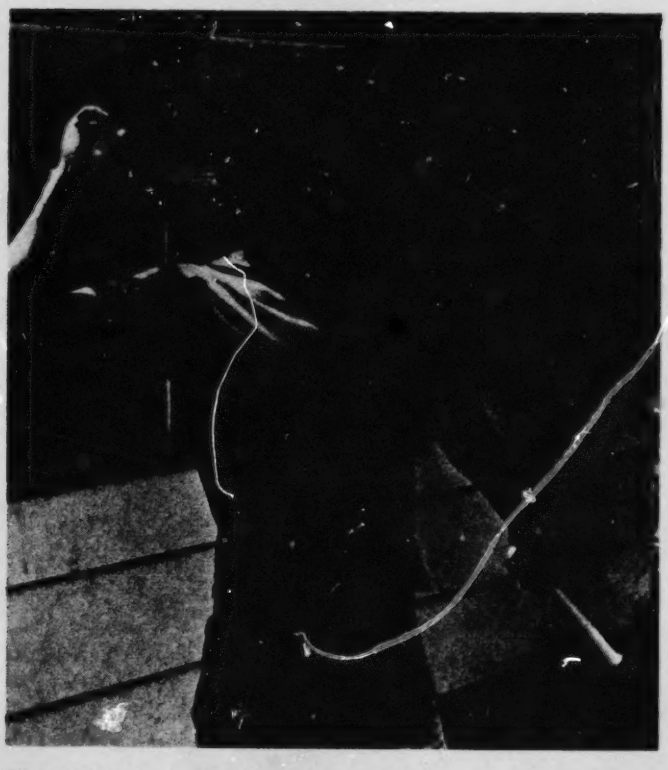
To prevent the hot lead from splitting the wood, Cecil binds the stick with leather straps.



The melted lead is poured into the stick. The lead hardens within a few minutes, and the artisan is ready for the final step.

The top is smoothed and finished.



The rabbit stick with the lead in the end is thrown first; if the hunter misses with that one then the other two sticks are used.

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Drum Making and Hominy

Barney Wesley is a hard man to get to see. He has a great deal of knowledge and many people come to him for advice. Barney talks about making drums and making hominy. He did not like talking to the tape machine but did it hoping it would encourage other Choctaw to follow the traditional Choctaw ways.

WHO TAUGHT YOU THE SKILLS THAT YOU HAVE?

Oh, no one taught me anything. As I was growing up, I taught myself the things I know and which I thought was right. Some things, my wife's daddy taught me. My father-in-law and I cut this tree down, and he said, let's make a drum; so, we each cut a piece for our own, and we made one each. And, that is when I learned. And then I sold it, and there was really nothing to it.

WHY DID HE WANT YOU TO LEARN TO MAKE THE THINGS HE SHOWED YOU?

He didn't want the traditional ways to fade away where they won't exist anymore. If I learned, then other people would learn from me. They used to say that the traditional ways will be gone, and it's getting there. Soon, there will be no one to teach the traditional ways.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU LEARNED THESE SKILLS?

As I remember, I was about 8 years old when I started learning things. As I learned what needed to be done, I tried it myself.

DO YOU ENJOY MAKING THE THINGS YOU MAKE?

Yes, I just only do it because I enjoy doing it—and not because someone has asked me to do it or make it for them.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO LEARN THE SKILLS THAT YOU KNOW?

I just learned them by looking.

HOW DID THE CHOCTAW TEACH THE SKILLS IN THE OLD DAYS?

When they were teaching you, they used to teach in a house or gather up in a yard and teach each other, where they have the equipment to work with. People used to learn from one another. Now, they work as an individual, working at home.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU STARTED MAKING CHOCTAW DRUMS?

In 1946 I learned it, and I made it and then I sold it. I sold it real cheap.

WHERE DID YOU FIRST SEE DRUMS BEING MADE?

I saw the drums being made by my father, and he had it

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and someone took it, and that is all I know other than that they used to make it. Now, there are people who can make drums, but they aren't, because they cannot work with their hands anymore.

WHAT IS THE DRUM USED FOR?

To make songs with the drum and to help make music by beating on the drum for a Choctaw to sing the song. It was given to us by our Lord along with the Choctaw songs for the Choctaws to sing. In the old days the leader walked in front and the next person beat the drum, and you can hear them coming, by partners, singing and shouting. That is when they used to have good times, and they used to say they used to go to a wonderful place in the land.

ARE THEY STILL USING THE DRUM AS THEY USED IT BEFORE?

Yes, if they get the right kind of wood that they need to make the drum.

WHAT TYPE OF WOOD IS NEEDED TO MAKE A DRUM?

Some people say tupelo gum, pine, or hickory that is hollow. When you hit the tree from the outside it makes a sound and then when you make a drum with it, it will make A good sound. When we were going to cut a pine tree it had air inside the hollow tree, and when the air came out it made a loud sound as if the tree breathed free from the air.

CAN YOU GET THESE TREES ANYWHERE?

Yes, wherever they can find them in the woods. They don't allow us to just go into the woods and cut a tree down. The Whites are like that.

WOULD YOU BE GLAD IF YOUR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES LEARNED THE SKILLS THAT YOU HAVE?

Yes, I wish they would learn them. Sometime I sit down like this and I talk about it to people that come by. If a person knows something else, we all sit down and talk about it, exchange what we know. I didn't think I would be sitting here talking like this, except I feel people need to know.

HOW DID YOUR GRANDFATHER AND GRANDMOTHER LEARN TO MAKE THESE THINGS?

When they were teaching each other how to make things, they used to go sit there and watch how to prepare

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for and make the things they know. They started making the things by thinking about what would be right or what would be pretty, or worthwhile, to make. The people who made these things in the old days weren't many.

DID THE CHOCTAW AND WHITES EVER INTERACT SOCIALLY?

The White man used to come to the dances, too, but now I never hear of that or see them enter into Choctaw dances. The White people used to sing and dance with the Choctaw. Speaking about that, the White people they can sing the church songs in Choctaw, if they sing along with them. But, I haven't seen the Whites go to Choctaw dances for a very long time.

LET'S TALK ABOUT MAKING HOMINY

Okay.

TELL US HOW TO MAKE HOMINY.

First, it is done by peeling the corn—by putting the corn in a bucket and using a stick to beat the corn to peel it. There are two different types of hominy. The bigger ones are called hominy, and the other is, too, but the bigger ones you cook with chicken or neck bone; the other type of hominy comes when you beat the corn with a stick to peel the skin off and it crumbles to little pieces—you cook that with beans. Some people put something in it to peel off the skin, but I don't. Salt meat can be sliced and cooked with hominy or chicken.

HOW IS HOMINY COOKED?

I just add only water to get the skin peeled off. After that you can cook it anytime, but you should allow three days to process the hominy and cook it. If you are going to crumble the corn, you can do it in one day and cook it.

HOW DID THE CHOCTAW LEARN TO MAKE HOMINY?

A little child told them. First there was a little child, and a dove came and gave a seed to this child and the child took it and called it corn. The child planted the corn for the Choctaws. The child dug a hole and put a fish at the bottom of it for fertilizer, and then the child put the kernl of corn in the ground. The corn grew and had several ears. Even though it was just one plant this was the beginning of Choctaw corn. The Choctaws had so much corn, they needed a way to keep it; so they dried it and decided to use it to make hominy.

CAN BOTH MEN AND WOMEN MAKE HOMINY?

Yes, but the women make it more than the men. The men help the women finish—that is about all. Traditionally, if they are here and she says I am going to do this, even if a man was doing something else, he would quit and come and help her. Even if a person was just walking along and saw you cooking they would say, let me do it for you, and then move on when they finished.

CAN MEN AND WOMEN BOTH DO OTHER THINGS?

Yes, more people should do these things together. In the old days, even in getting firewood they used to help one another, but now they don't. Only older people are doing that today.

WHAT RULES DID YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER SET FOR YOU WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?

To be good and make a good living. My dad didn't really tell me these things, but the other side [in-laws] did. They told me not to be a bad man, or husband, since that wasn't good to behave that way.

HOW ARE THINGS DIFFERENT TODAY THAN WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD?

Today, things are different about cutting hair. Both males and females have short hair today, and it's kind of hard to say who is who.

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Cooking hominy is a community project with everyone taking a turn stirring and cutting wood for the fire. The hominy must be stirred often to prevent burning.

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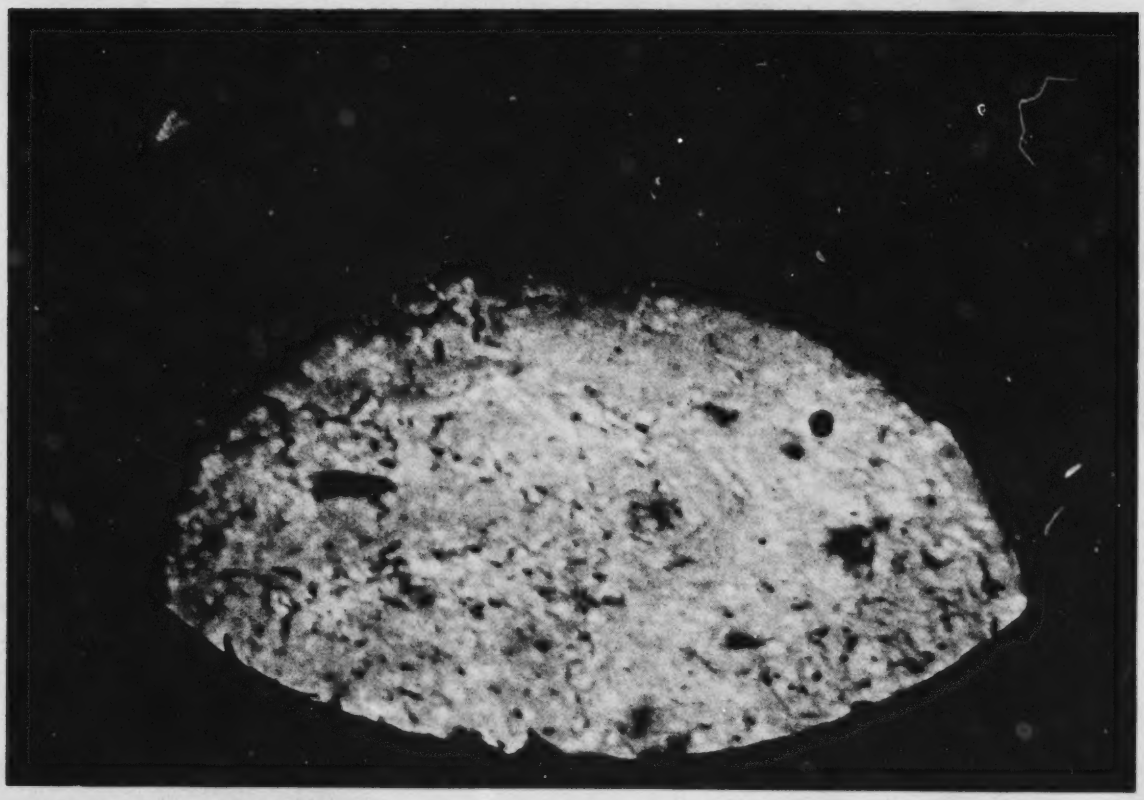
It takes many hours of cooking for the hominy and pork to get done. Fried chicken or pork neck bones are usually prepared at the same time.



The hominy is done when it has absorbed all the liquid. The hominy pictured above is ready to eat.

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Lena and Marian are getting the food ready for the feast. Hominy is a must for any gathering of Choctaws. Barney's birthday was the occasion for the making of hominy.

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Barney inspects a hollow section of a tree for possible cracks and holes that might cause problems during the making of the drum.

A chisel is used to take off the outer bark and to round out the inside of the drum.

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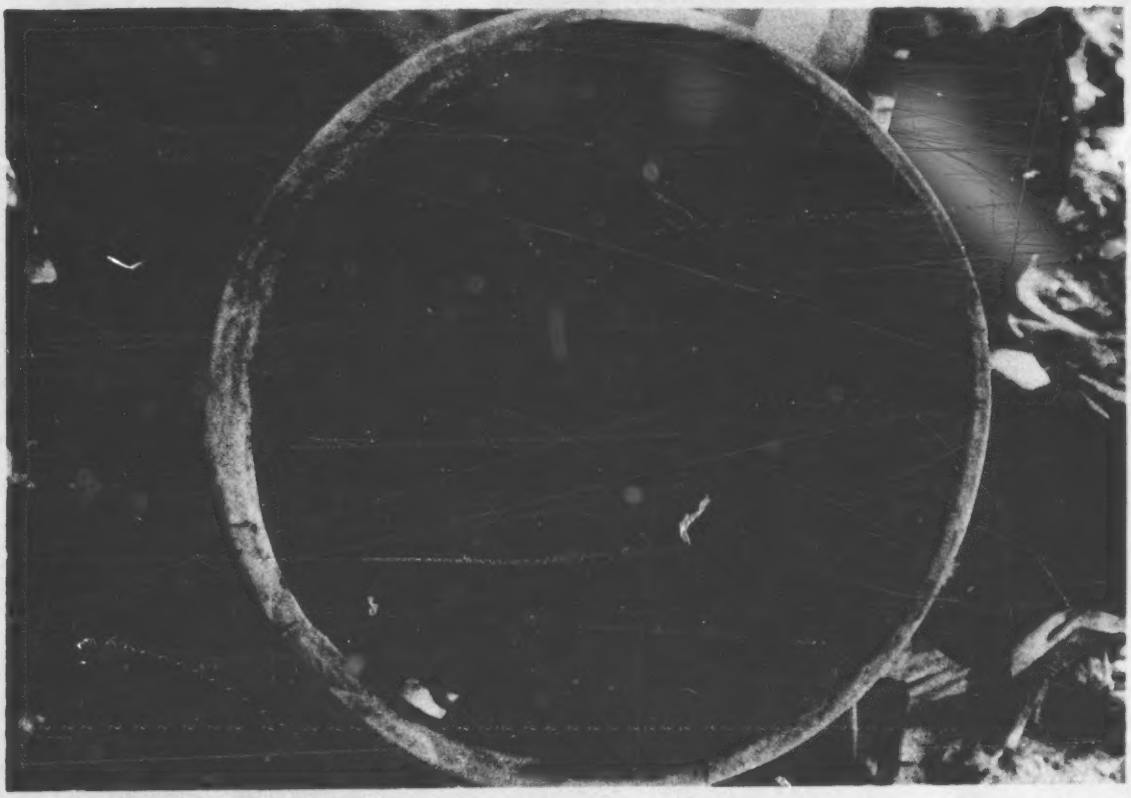
A draw knife is used to take off the inner bark and to make the outside of the drum round.



The inside of the drum is filed smooth. Note the tar used to fill holes that developed during work on the drum.

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The inter dimension is checked and rechecked to make sure it is consistant all the way around.

A hole is drilled in the wood to let air out. Beating a drum builds air pressure and eventually cracks the head.

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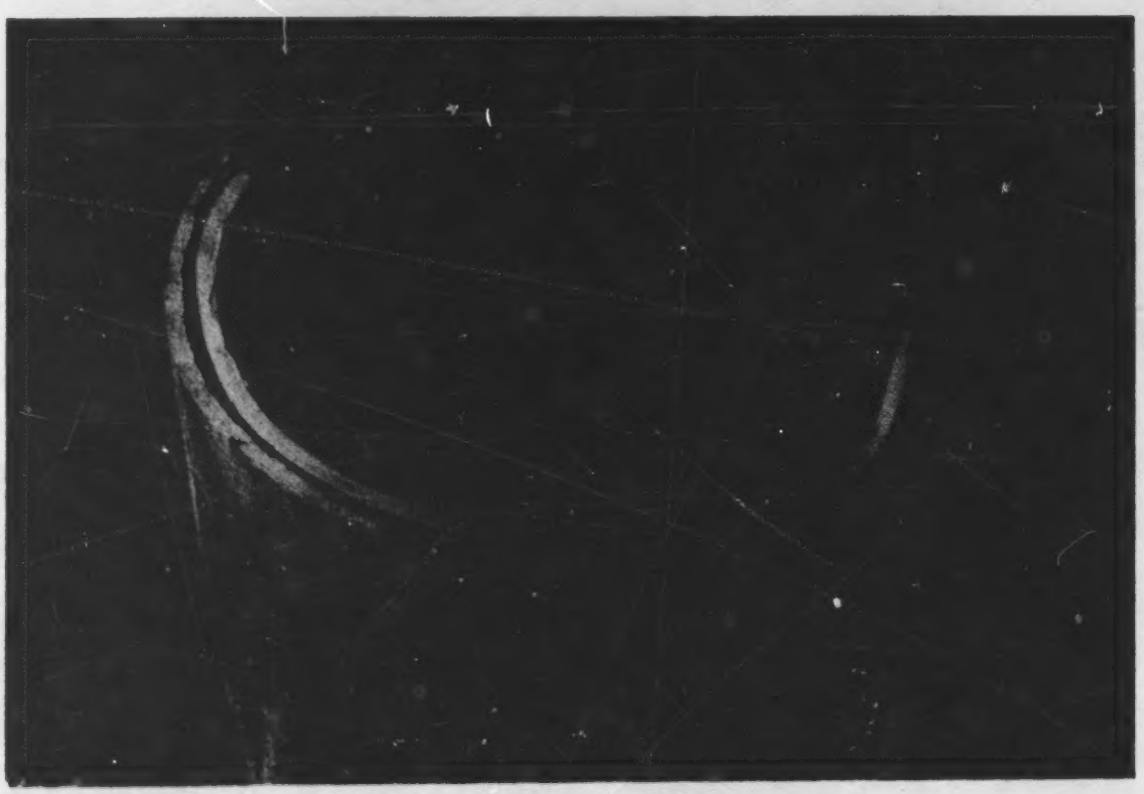
Next a rim for the drum head is needed. Hickory is the best wood for this. It must be straight without any knots. Barney measures for the correct circumference of the drum.



A draw knife is used to thin and shape the hickory. Then it is bent and left inside the drum for a few days, so it will dry in the desired shape.

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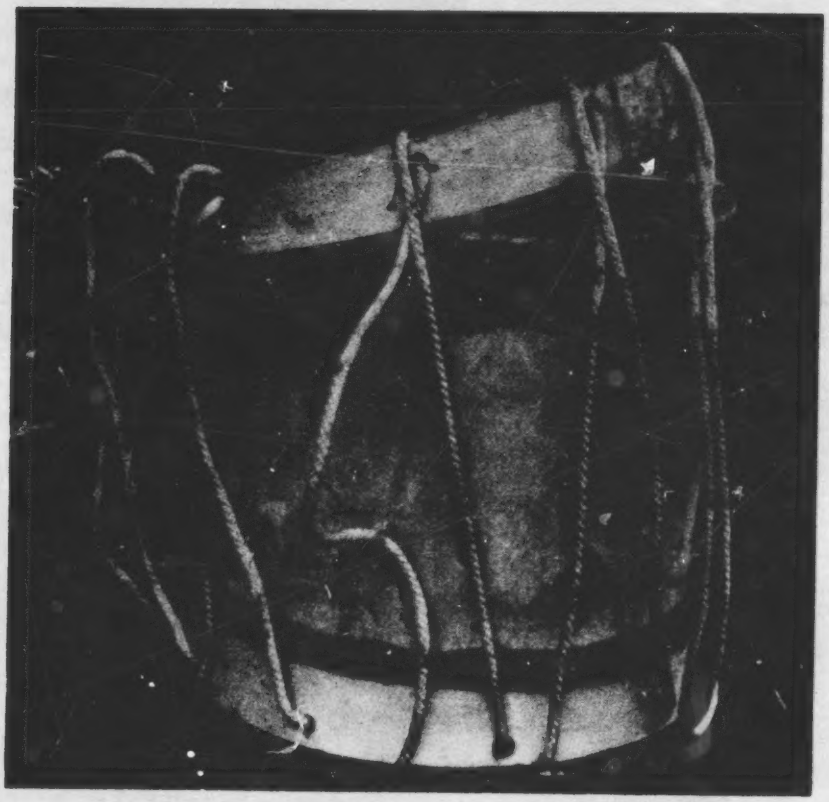
Then a raw hide is stretched over the rim and allowed to dry. A Choctaw drum has a head at both ends.



Pine is used for the top and bottom rims. The rope must be strung carefully because an error will cause the rim to crack.

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Traditionally, Choctaw drilled holes with hot rods and used hide to tie the ends of the wood together. Barney said "I had some tacks so I thought I'd try them. They work Okay."

The drum heads must be pulled tight.

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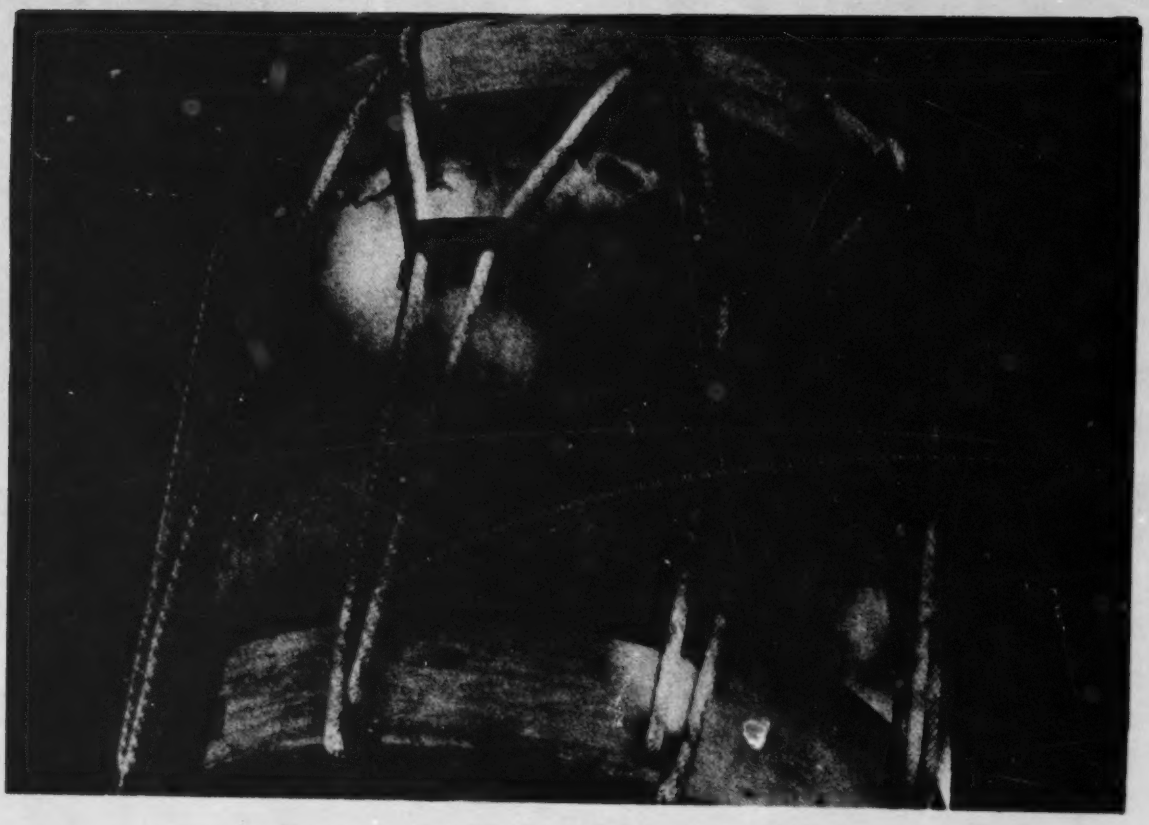
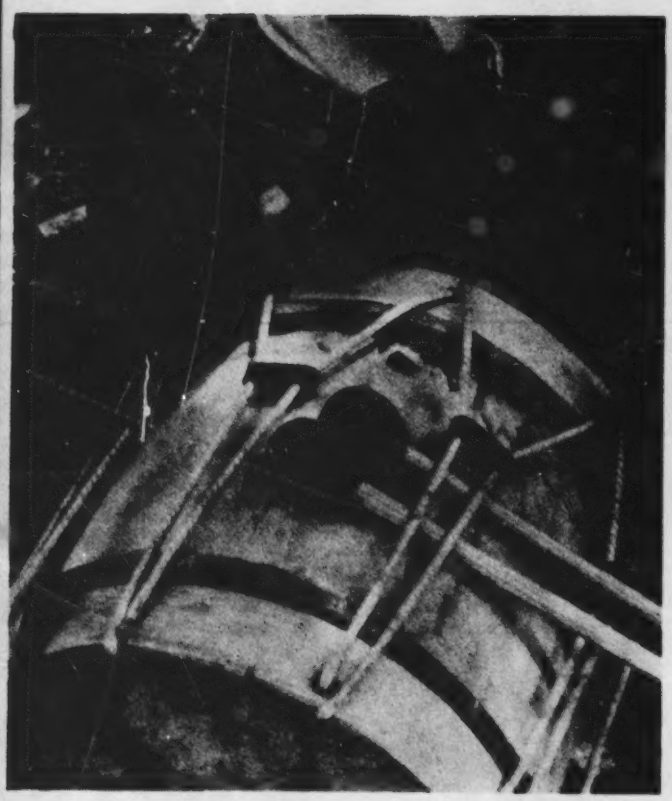


Leather strips are attached to the cords to adjust the sound of the drum.



Last, but not least, a shoulder strap is attached.

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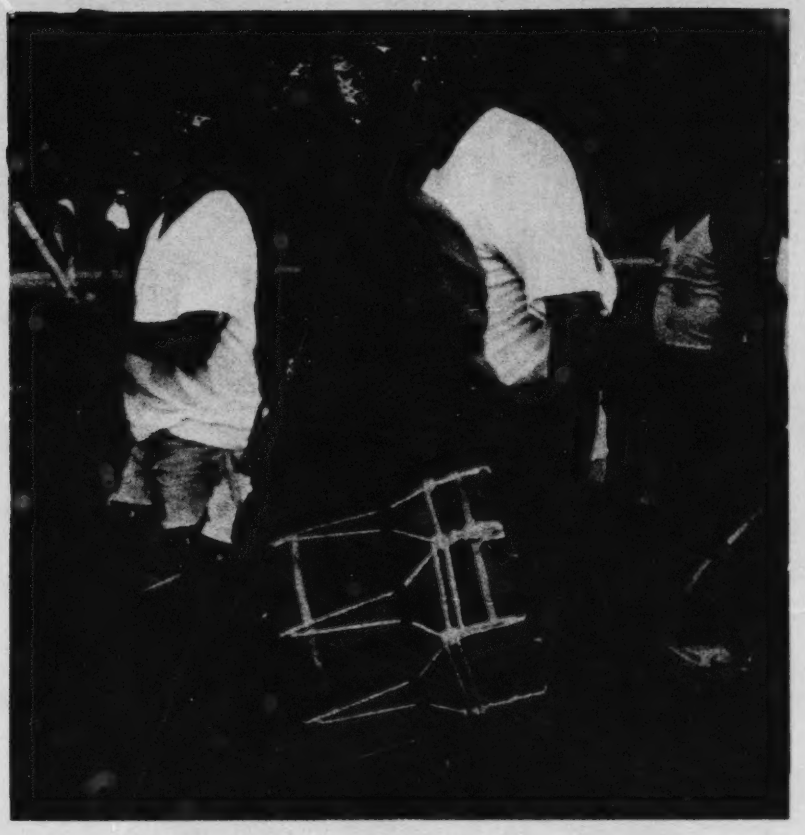

The Choctaw drum is used at stickball games and at outdoor meetings to call people together.

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Baskets: Cane and Oak

Esbie Gibson lives in the Conehatta community. As a little girl, she was sent to church school for a few months. Esbie has been making baskets for a long time and has taught others how to make baskets. She is concerned that many young Choctaw aren't learning tribal traditions; she feels that many young Choctaw are moving away from the reservation and not practicing the Choctaw ways.

WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO MAKE BASKETS?

I watched my mother making baskets, and I tried and tried because I wanted to learn. She would start doing it and would lay it down' saying this is how you do it, and I would follow the pattern. She says do this, and I follow her pattern again, tying it together to shape it into a basket. And so I learned. People from long ago knew how to make baskets, and my mother's deceased mother knew it. So, my mother learned how, and then I learned it from my mother.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU LEARNED HOW TO MAKE BASKETS?

When people ask me how old I was I tell them I don't know, because I never thought anyone would ask me that; so, I never try to remember how old I was when I started making baskets. All I know is that I was very young.

DID YOUR MOTHER TEACH YOU BECAUSE SHE WANTED YOU TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE BASKETS?

I guess I just wanted to learn it by myself.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE FOR YOU TO LEARN?

I don't know, but I just know I did it when I was still young, and I don't know how old I was then.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO MAKE A BASKET?

I started one yesterday and I haven't finished it yet. I would say it takes about one day, or two days, to finish it. I just learned how to make a pitcher for milk. I thought and thought about it for quite awhile and then do it; it sells good. There is nobody that can do that type of weaving.

DID YOUR GRANDFATHER OR GRANDMOTHER EVER TRADE WITH OTHER CHOCTAW?

Yes, they used to trade baskets for things, because I myself used to do it.

WHAT TYPE OF FARMING DID THE CHOCTAW DO?

They planted cotton and corn for the Whites, and

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whatever the cotton was worth the White man and the Choctaw would both get half. They had a private garden and planted peas, potatoes, and peanuts, and they had a pig and a cow. So, they didn't have to buy milk or meat, and they had lard when they killed a pig.

CAN A MAN ALSO MAKE THE BASKETS LIKE YOU MAKE, OR ARE THEY MADE BY WOMEN ONLY?

Grandpa used to make them, but he died. Others used to make baskets, but all of them are deceased now.

ARE THERE THINGS THAT BOTH MEN AND WOMEN DO?

It used to be that women worked like men, planting crops, hoeing the garden, picking cotton, or picking corn. Nowadays, there are women working in men's places.

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, DID YOUR PARENTS ALLOW YOU TO GO ON A DATE?

No.

DID YOU GO VISITING?

A long time ago, they used to walk to go visiting. Later, they had a wagon to ride in when going to Church, and others who didn't have a wagon walked to Church.

DOES THE DESIGN ON THE BASKET MEAN SOMETHING?

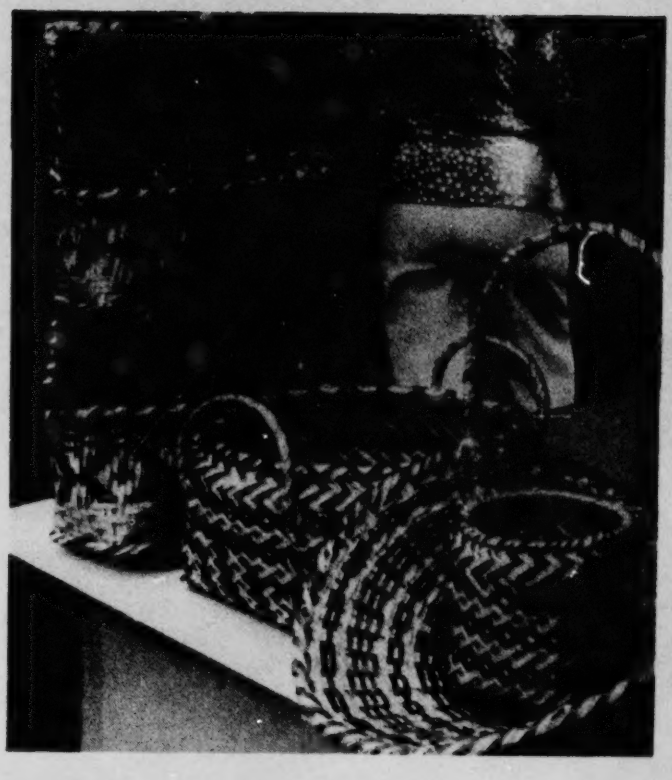
I just look at the type that was made in the back years, and I have followed that ever since.

WHERE DO YOU GET THE CANES?

By the river. When we get to the river, we go and pick them, and we take them home. We dry them, and then we dye them into red, yellow, black, and green.

DO PEOPLE TODAY USE THE BASKETS, OR DO THEY HAVE THEM IN THE HOUSE AS A DECORATION?

Most of us make them to sell. Even though I have one in the house just to hang, I always manage to sell it when someone comes by and wants to buy it.



WHICH CHOCTAW PERSON IS THE MOST OUTSTANDING BASKET MAKER?

I don't know, but I know we make about the same thing, or they all make better than I.

HOW MUCH WOULD EACH BASKET COST?

The bigger ones are more, since things are so expensive now, $30.00 — or $25.00

WHAT ABOUT THE SPOON HOLDER BASKET?

Lela sells hers at $30.00 for two baskets. I sell mine at $40.00 for three baskets, which hold knives, forks, and spoons, since I put a diamond design on them.

WHY DO YOU MAKE BASKETS?

I sell them, so then I can maybe get material and make me a dress.

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Esbie is gathering cane in a thick undergrowth of cane (oski) and other swamp plants. Besides expired bovine, more dangerous locals, such as poisonous snakes, sometimes show up. Also, many landlords do not want the cane cut from their land.

Esbie's knife is razor sharp. Here she cuts off foliage to prepare for bundling. Leaves are left on some of the canes so that a longer time will be required for those canes to dry out.

When deep in the swamp, it's easier to bundle up the canes and throw them over the shoulder. A strip of cane is used to bind each stack.

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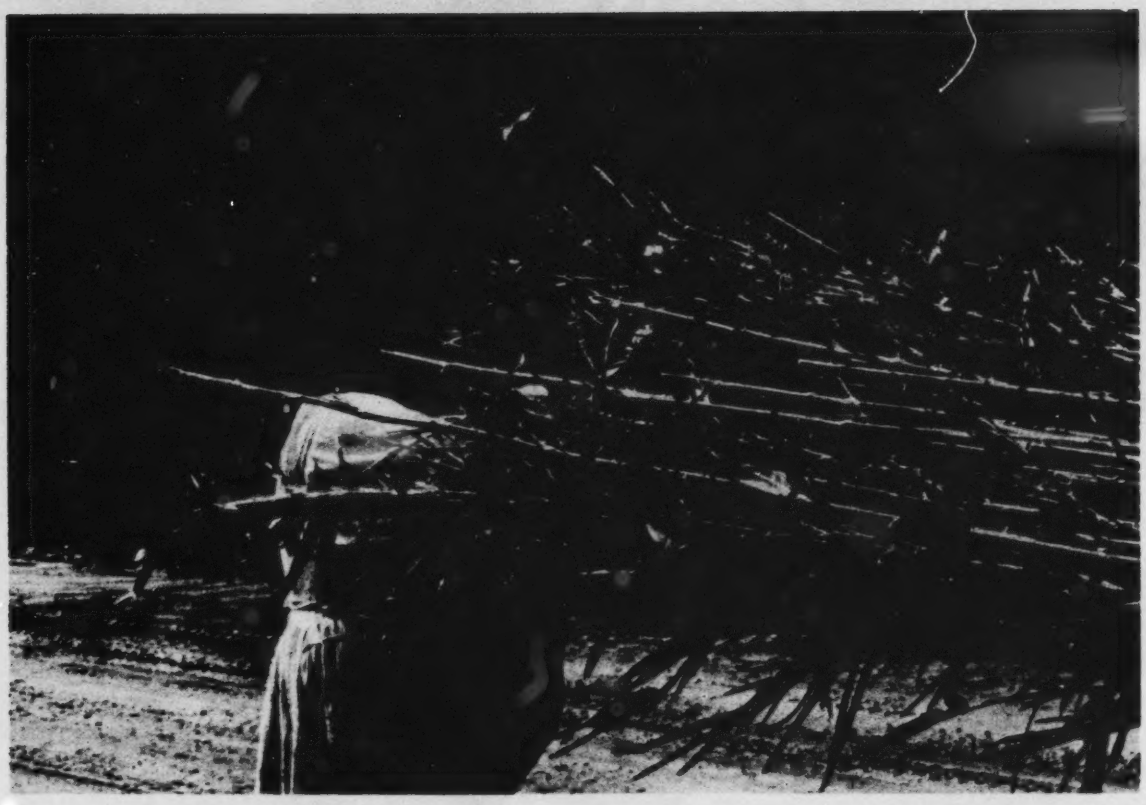

Checking the load is important to be sure none of it falls out. A full pickup load (600-700 canes) will keep Esbie busy for several weeks. Cane, being a grass, is actually grows better when thinned. Today there is little cane because so much swamp land is being drained for farming purposes.

Back home, Esbie cuts the end of the cane in quarters, and then uses this tool, which the Choctaw call "the cane for splitting cane," uses the tool to split it all the way.

Once the cane is split, one strip is taken from each quarter. Notice the use of the sleeve to protect Esbie's hand.

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Here she wraps a bunch of cane for dyeing. The length of time a bundle is left in the dye determines how intense the color will be.

Once started, the strip is pulled apart from the center, and the center is then discarded.

The dried and dyed cane is cut to the appropriate length required for the basket to be made. Here Esbie picks out the colors she wants for a basket.

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The cane is soaked for a few minutes to make it more flexible. The base is begun with three strips held in the hand, and the crosspieces are woven in and out.

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Next, the base is laid down and tightened and then soaked again in preparation for turning up the sides of the basket.

Turning up the sides of the basket must be done properly or the cane will break. Here Esbie prepares the first strip to hold the sides in place.

Once the turn is made, the weaving continues to the desired height. A design is achieved by how the colors are laid out on the base and how the side strips are woven in and out.

The ends are turned over and around to make the top lip of the basket, and the extra length of cane is cut off.

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Next, the flexible twig is cut, thinned, and bent to make the handle. Finally, it is woven into the side of the basket.

A long strip of cane is used to wrap the handle back and forth several times, and the end is woven into the base to hold it in place. Finally, any extra threds of cane are removed.

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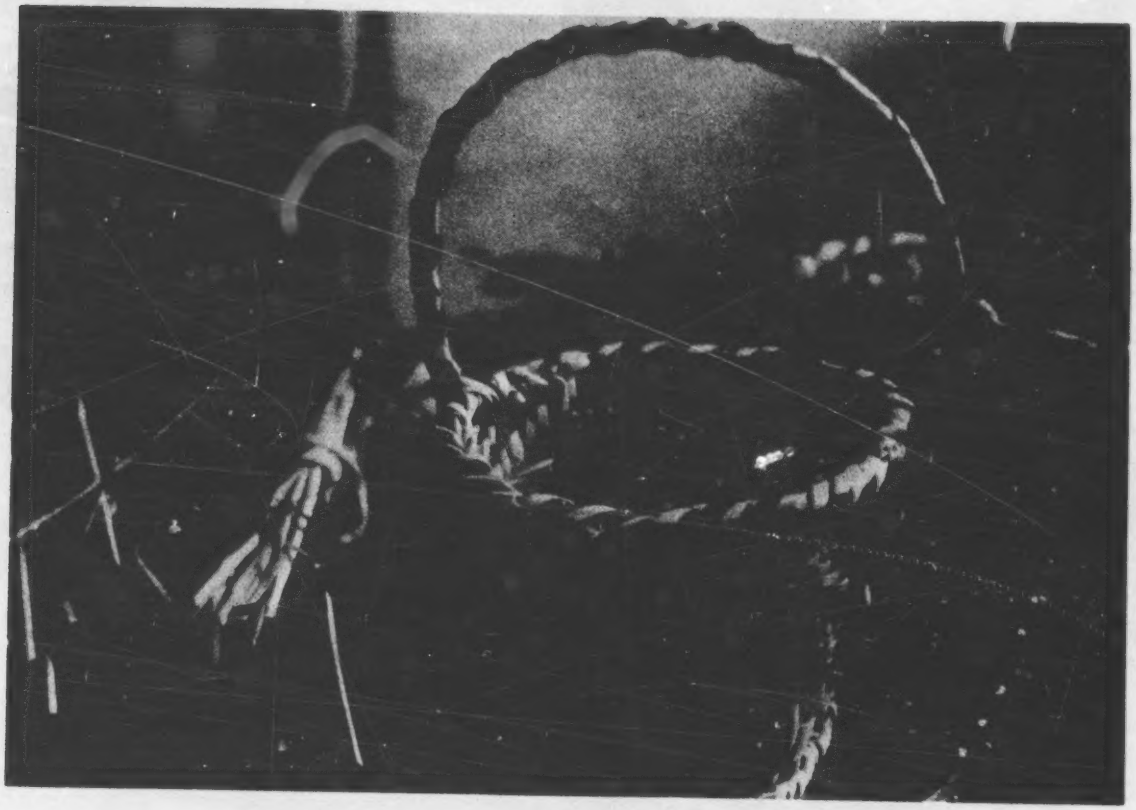

Pictured here is the finished basket. Note, this basket is not the one shown in the previous pictures but is another type of basket made by Esbie.

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Melvin Henry lives several miles outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi on land his father paid for. He makes his living mainly as a farmer but also cuts firewood and pulpwood. He enjoys his life and expects nothing more than to survive. He makes many things by hand rather than buying them. Melvin is close to being self-sufficient.

DID ANYONE ENCOURAGE YOU TO LEARN TO MAKE BASKETS AND AX HANDLES?

I learned by myself. My old man (his father) did it and wanted us to learn and that's why we learned it. My old man was making oak baskets and ax handles, and he was the one that pushed for us to learn how. He said, "since you're not doing anything, try to make it, and then when you learn how, and at a time when you don't have money, you can have a little money when you sell it."

When I was young I didn't want to bother with it. My father always made all the baskets we needed. A few years after my father died I planted a lot of corn. When I went to pick the corn, it was so much that I needed a tub basket, but all the baskets were old and terrible. After that I tried making the baskets.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE IT?

It took three years. In the summer I cut down several oak trees and said I was going to make baskets. I started on the bottom and tried to turn the corner up but I couldn't, so I decided to do it at another time, or maybe sell pulpwood to make money. When I went back to the basket, the wood was no good. I tried for several summers. A person cannot just learn how to do it, just like that. I had to remember how my dad made them, and then I had to work to make it. It took me about as long to make a good ax handle.

WHERE DO YOU GET THE MATERIALS YOU MAKE BASKETS FROM?

The oak is mine, that I chop from around here.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU LEARNED HOW?

About 30 years old. I learned how to make ax handles. When my father was here he would make sure we learned how. He made a sample for us to follow, and when I finished, it was so terrible he would laugh at my work. Then he kept on insisting that I work on it until I got better and told me never to quit.

HOW DO YOU MAKE A BASKET?

With young timber, we stripped wide open and then we quartered it up, and we quartered it up some more, and then if it's too wide, we had to quarter it up again. We used a butcher knife. If we got syrup, we didn't use the wood, we just pour it like this [gestures]. In the wintertime, I could hardly do anything with it—I'd just as soon to go rabbit hunting or bird hunting. In the summertime, I enjoy working in summertime; but in the wintertime, I just go hunt rabbit. This is what my brother made; this is called a picnic basket. This [gestures] is the way I strip it, and I use a drawknife to make it smooth. I used a two-forked tree with a plank like this [gestures] and another plank like that which makes it clamp it down; that is why I use a drawknife. That's the one my brother made, but I don't think that is an oak basket [gestures].

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WHEN YOU WERE STILL YOUNG, DID YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER SET RULES FOR YOU?

"Someday you might be worth something in the future," they told us. They told us to work, and think about what you are told. At that time, I was still too young and I could never think that way, but now I remember all those things that I was told—but when you're still young you don't want to remember. You think to yourself, "Let me do this," and you do something. When we would sit around the campfire and drink coffee, I was told to put the stuff in the wagon and if I should forget something, when he comes back he used to spank me. He used to say, "You didn't do everything I asked you to do,' and by telling me to do this and that, he expected me to listen and do as I am told. "Listen very carefully so you will understand what is going on," he said.

They told them to do the same. Like one day you will be all by yourself and if no one can work for you, you will work for yourself. The girls learned the same things we did, like plowing the field, planting and growing food in the field, and then enjoying eating it.

DO YOU WANT YOUR RELATIVES AND FRIENDS TO LEARN THESE TRADITIONAL SKILLS?

Nowadays they don't want to learn anything, or work on it, so even if you tell them, or teach them, I think it's not worth taking the time. Some time ago, the Choctaws from the other side of the river wanted to learn how to make baskets from oak, and we taught them, but they just took pictures instead of trying to learn. If they want to learn, and would do their best, it would be a great idea to teach them. They should pay attention, or watch very carefully, and try to learn from it but they make no effort to do that. If not, they will not learn anything at all. The traditional way is gone since the people today aren't trying to learn, or eager to learn, but if they come and ask I am more than willing to teach them.

CAN ONLY MEN MAKE WHAT YOU MAKE?

Some women want to learn how to make the oak baskets. One White person asked to be taught but doesn't have the time to come and learn. If they really try hard, anybody can make baskets.

DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL?

No, our elders didn't want us to go to school. The Choctaws weren't suppose to go to the White school, but still they insisted on us paying the school tax. Some of them from another town were interested in teaching us, but the Whites living close by didn't want us in their schools.

WHEN YOU WERE STILL A CHILD, HOW WAS IT DIFFERENT THAN IT IS TODAY?

Oh, the older people today do not bother to tell the young people to do this and that, and they don't insist that the young people learn the skills of the traditional ways.

DID THE CHOCTAW TRADE WITH THE WHITES?

Yes, Mother used to say that they made baskets of oak and traded them for cornmeal or meat. A long time ago, Grandmother used to make baskets, and she asked me to

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go with her to the mill. She got her hat and I went with her, and she sold the basket, got meat, soap, and traded anything that was worth money, and we came back home.

WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS FARM?

We planted cotton and corn, raised pigs and cows, and that is how we survived. We didn't make anything out of it except to survive from it. We paid the taxes on the land, and we didn't work for the Whites.

HOW MUCH MONEY DO YOU MAKE FROM BASKETS?

You can't make a big profit out of it, so it's just a spare-time job. It is like sewing or crochet because it takes a long time to do it. I am making ax handles, and by making a few I will have a few dollars. Choctaw people will have something going if they try their best in learning the skills of the traditional way. I think that the traditional way is leaving because young people today are not willing to learn the skills. If they would be willing to learn, we would be glad to teach them.

DO YOU MAKE THESE THINGS JUST BECAUSE YOU ENJOY DOING IT?

Oh yes, I enjoy doing it. In the summertime, about July, I decide to make baskets and just sit around under the shade tree making baskets. When I feel like I want to go fishing, I just pick up my fishing pole and go fishing and when I come back I work on my baskets.

DO YOU MAKE BASKETS THE YEAR AROUND?

In winter, I cannot do it—only in the summertime. Ax handles can be made anytime whether it's hot, warm, or cold. I just sit around in the house and make them, so when summertime comes I can make the oak baskets.

WHO DO YOU SELL THE BASKETS TO?

Oh, just mostly anybody that wants it. It looks like everybody just wants baskets.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST FOR WHAT YOU MAKE AND SELL?

It doesn't cost much but I am going to take the prices up. The small baskets were $10.00, but now it's going to be

$15.00, and the bigger baskets make the prices go up. Baskets that were $15.00 are now $20.00; cotton baskets are $30.00; and a 100-pound bushel basket is $50.00. I am going to get a watch and time myself to see how long it's taking me to finish. I am going to count it at $4.00 per hour so I can know how much to charge.

DID YOUR PARENTS EVER TALK ABOUT THE CHOCTAWS THAT WENT TO OKLAHOMA?

Our old man told us that when the Choctaws went to Oklahoma, the Whites from the East wanted to kill all the Choctaws or send all of them to Oklahoma. Oklahoma was awful, and some of them came back, moved back here, but some of them stayed there. Some of them started coming back and the others went to meet them to help them move back, and they said, "It's a terrible place; we are going back to where we lived before."

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Lela Solomon grew up in Scott County, Mississippi. Now she lives in the Conehatta community. She has been making baskets for many years and has taught both Choctaw and non-Choctaw how to weave. She also can make Choctaw sashes, but prefers to weave baskets. Lela is serious about her weaving and is proud of her ability as a weaver.

WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO MAKE BASKETS?

No one really ever tried teaching me. Mother used to make it and I used to watch her. When I was a little older, I followed her design of how she made it. I just learned it by myself, by observing very carefully how she made it.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO LEARN?

I don't know. I used to try to learn when my mother weaved baskets; then I'd quit and try again on another day. So, I don't remember when I learned it, but I don't think it took me a long time to learn.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU LEARNED IT?

I was about 11 years old.

WHEN YOU MAKE A BASKET, HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO FINISH?

When I could still see good, it never took me long to finish. I am not as fast with my hands anymore, and I finish about two a day if they are not very big.

DO YOU HAVE MANY CUSTOMERS?

Yes, but it is different now. Way back in the old days, we wanted to sell baskets, so we used to go door to door trying to sell baskets, when my mother was still alive; but now there are just a few people who can make baskets and a lot of people want to buy baskets. Lots of White people go door to door to the Choctaw people's homes wanting to buy baskets, and they sometimes don't have any luck in finding baskets.

DO YOU KNOW OF ANY OTHER PEOPLE WHO MAKE BASKETS?

There are people that can make baskets, but people want the baskets that I make. They read a newspaper article, or some news clippings elsewhere, and they say they know my name; that is how come I am so far behind in making baskets. Most people can't hardly make the type of basket that I make, and if someone else makes it, it don't look like mine, customers tell me. I could make baskets every day, but I get sick a lot lately, so I'm slow in making baskets now.

CAN MEN ALSO MAKE BASKETS, OR DO ONLY WOMEN MAKE THEM?

Men can do it, too, if they really want to. Way back in the past, some people who lived outside of Conehatta used to make them. The one person I know that makes good items sells them for me wehen I go to the fair.

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HOW MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF BASKETS ARE THERE?

There are lots of different types of baskets. I don't think it's over 20.

CAN YOU TELL US HOW THE BASKETS DIFFER?

I just make the double weave as an egg basket. When I start weaving, the cane is very long. You start weaving until you get to the top and then start weaving down and that's a double weave. The others are not like the double weave basket.

HOW MUCH DO BASKETS COST?

The prices differ. Baskets are high today. The sizes differ; the prices differ, too. If it's not big, $25.00. Things are so expensive that my baskets are a little high. That tall clothes basket I make for $150.00. A double weave this tall [indicates about 15 inches height with hands], I sell it for $50.00. I am behind in making egg baskets and picnic baskets mostly. People come back asking for either of the two I mentioned.

WHAT TYPE OF BASKET SELLS GOOD?

I don't kr w, but I myself sell egg basket most of the time. People buy the $20.00/$25.00 basket all the time.

WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP, HOW DID PEOPLE GET BY?

The Choctaw lived on corn, by having the corn ground or by trading it for something else. They made their living by planting corn and trading corn for other items needed.

WHEN YOU WERE STILL A CHILD, DID YOUR PARENTS SET RULES FOR YOU THAT YOU HAD TO GO BY?

Yes, my dad used to set rules for me. But, if my dad wasn't home, my mom was, and she asked, "Where are you going? and "When will you be back?" She told me to come home soon. If I went to the store, or somewhere, I just went there and came back.

DO YOU WISH FOR YOUR GRANDCHILDREN TO LEARN THE SKILLS THAT YOU KNOW?

Yes, I wish they can learn what our elders know and do, but my grandchildren don't even know what that means. And my daughter can't even make baskets. The small children don't even care to learn. The Choctaw aren't supposed to cut their hair and dress differently, but now they are following the patterns of the White people. The Choctaw quit their ways of wearing the Choctaw dress and started cutting their hair. I didn't want my daughter to cut her hair, but she keeps on cutting her hair. The Choctaw's way of living will be gone.

WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU USE TO MAKE BASKETS?

I use the cane when I can find it. I strip the cane and let it dry. Then, I boil it after it's dry and dye it.

WHERE DO YOU GET THE MATERIALS YOU NEED TO MAKE BASKETS?

A place called Horse Shoe [a place known to local people], that is where I used to get the canes at. But, some of the other people come and get cane there, too, so I can't hardly find them. So, I go close to Walnut Grove and get a few canes there. Since I don't have anybody to go with me, I have to find someone to go with me to get the canes. It's hard to find canes now.

CAN YOU STRIP THE CANE ANYTIME?

Anytime, you can strip the cane. If the frost gets to the cane you can strip the cane easy, but during the summer time the roots start to grow and that's not a very good time to get it. When the frost hits the cane twice, during winter, the canes cannot be stripped because it's too soft to be stripped right.

ABOUT THE DESIGN, DO YOU DYE THAT?

That is what I meant when I said I boil them. There used to be dye for the Choctaw, but we can't find the roots no more. So, we just use the dye you can buy from the store.

WHY DO YOU MAKE BASKETS?

I make baskets because I want to.

EVEN IF YOU WERE NOT GOING TO SELL THEM, DO YOU ENJOY MAKING BASKETS?

Yes, like today, if I don't have anything to do I enjoy making baskets, after I finish cleaning the house. I enjoy making baskets so that sometime I can't finish cleaning up the house. It's alright as long as I see good during sunlight. I enjoy doing it.

Selecting a tree for oak baskets is important. The bark must be straight without knots in it. Some trees which appear to be appropriate have bark that is too loose.

The size of the tree determines what size basket will be made. Great care must be taken because only one section can be taken from each tree, and to cut down a tree that can't be used would be wasteful.

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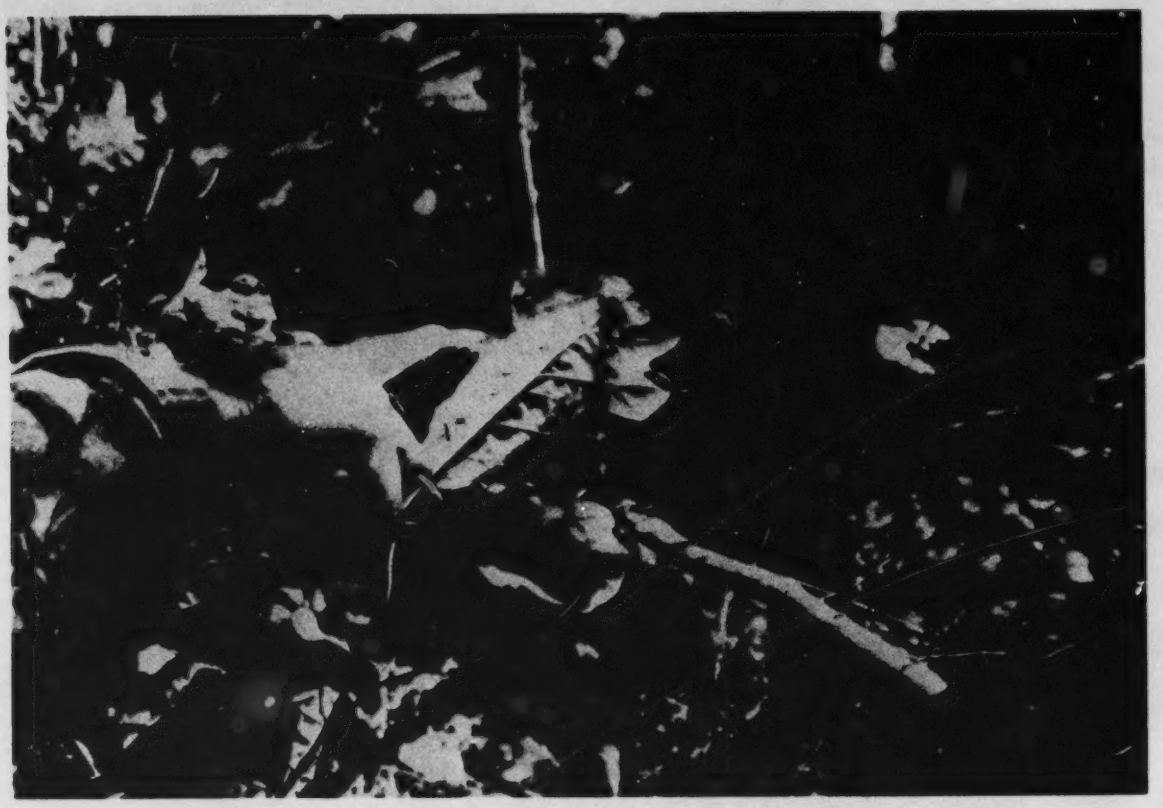

Another indication that a tree will be easy to work with is the shape of the leaves. If the leaves are broad like this, Melvin is assured that he has selected the right tree.

Next the wood is split and the bark is removed by a stripping process. The heart of the wood is not flexible enough for making baskets and isn't used.

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Then, cutting with the grain, Melvin pulls a strip away from the wood.

Each strip is then shaved to the appropriate width.

Sometimes a strip is too thick and must be worked with a drawknife.

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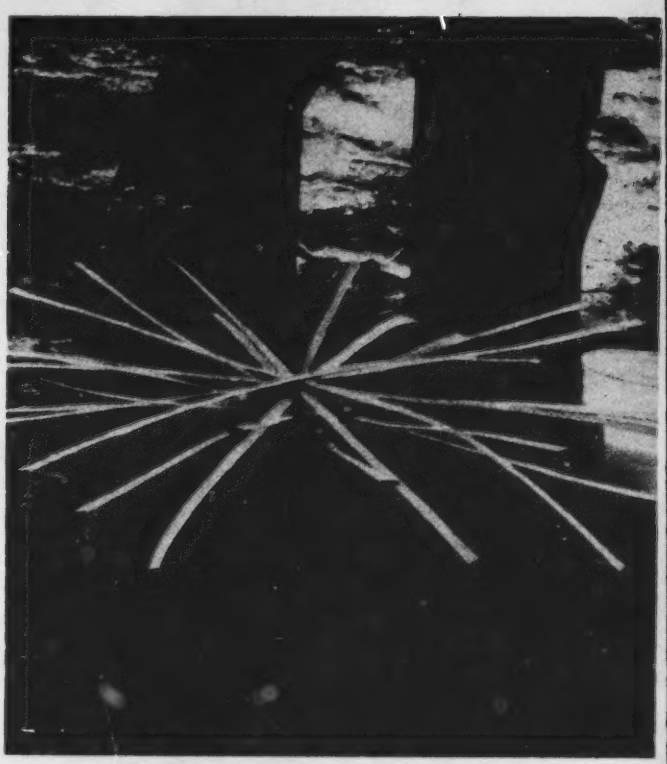
Again, the strips are trimmed to perfection. Notice the leather to protect Melvin's pants and knee.

Melvin's father taught him to start making baskets by laying eight strips out on the ground. Today, in order to make the work easier, Melvin



places the eight strips on a spool top to keep from working on the ground. Then, eight more strips are laid on top of the first. It is impossible to make a basket with the wrong number of strips.

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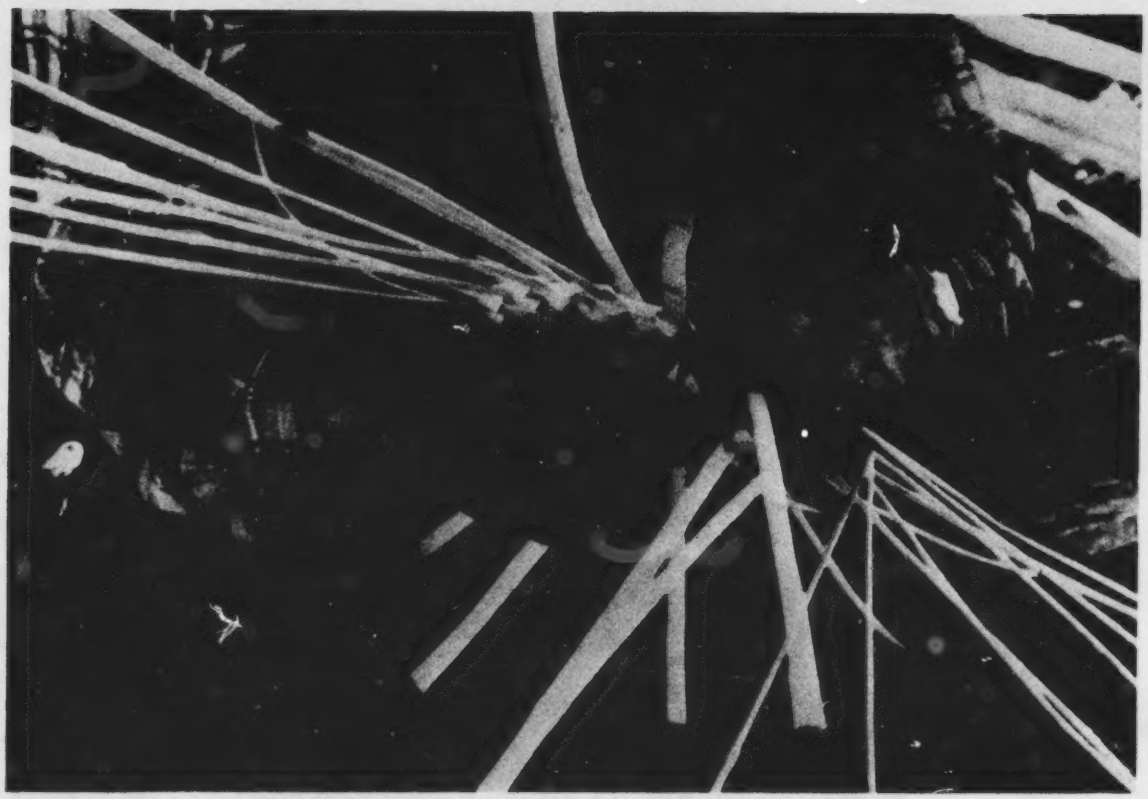

Now the hard work of weaving begins. Making the base is difficult. While this picture was being taken, Melvin had to start over four times before he got it just right. According to him, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right."

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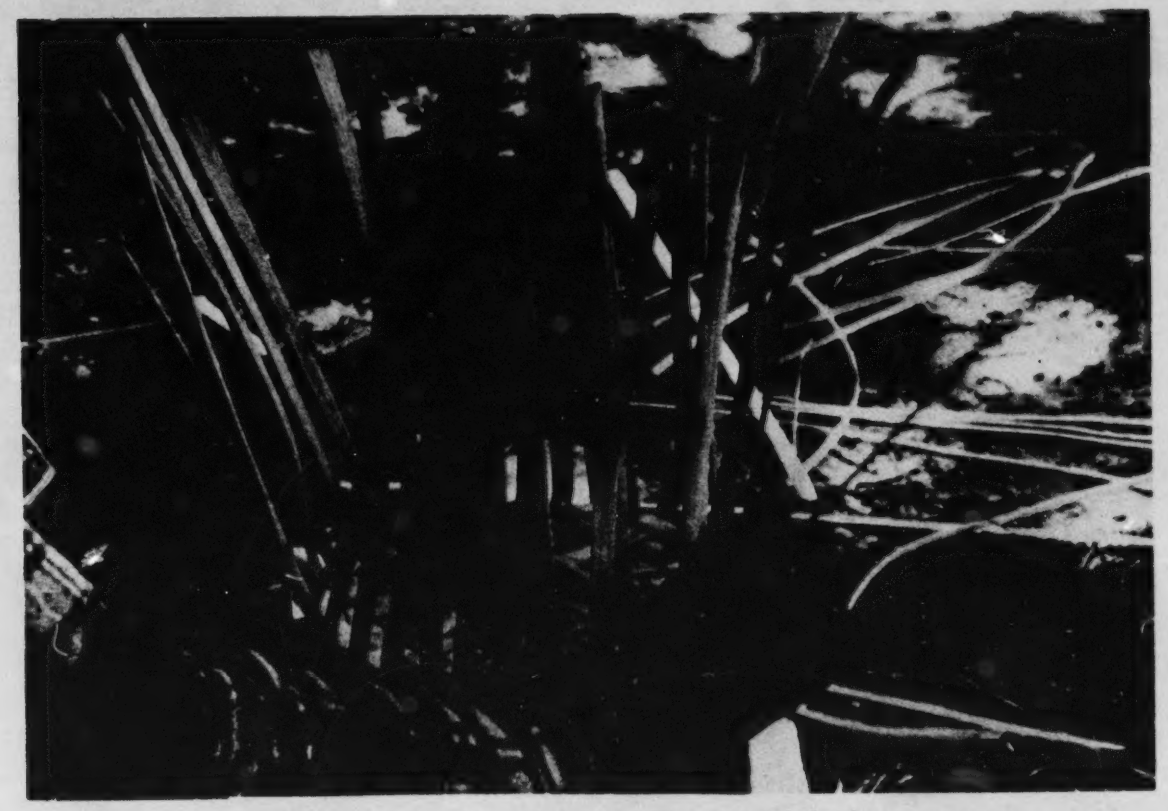
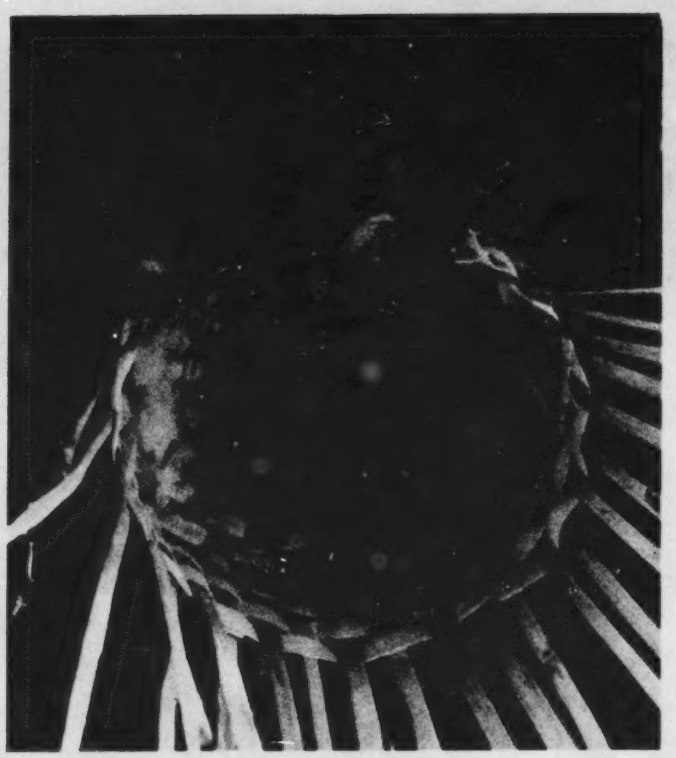


Turning up the side is a tricky business. The strips might break, so a little water is added to make them pliable.



Then the process of weaving in and out begins. It's important to overlap each piece to make the basket strong.

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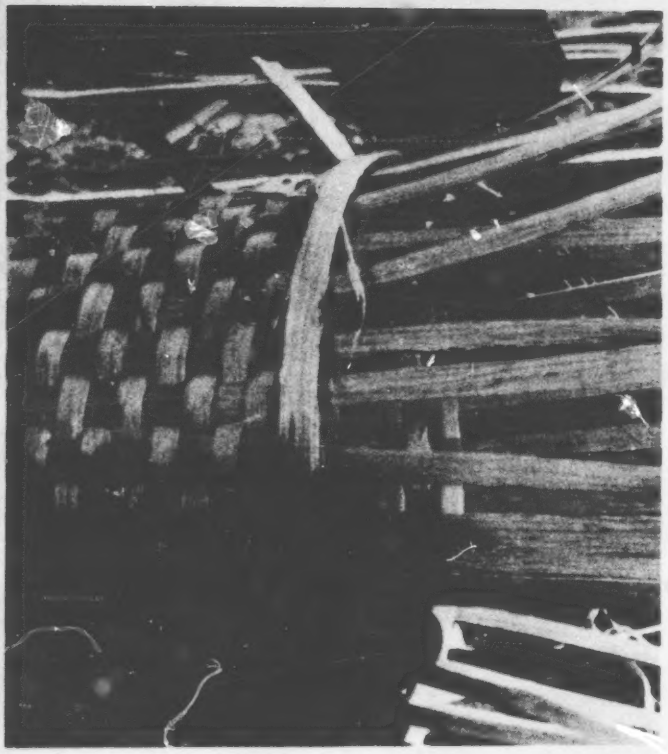
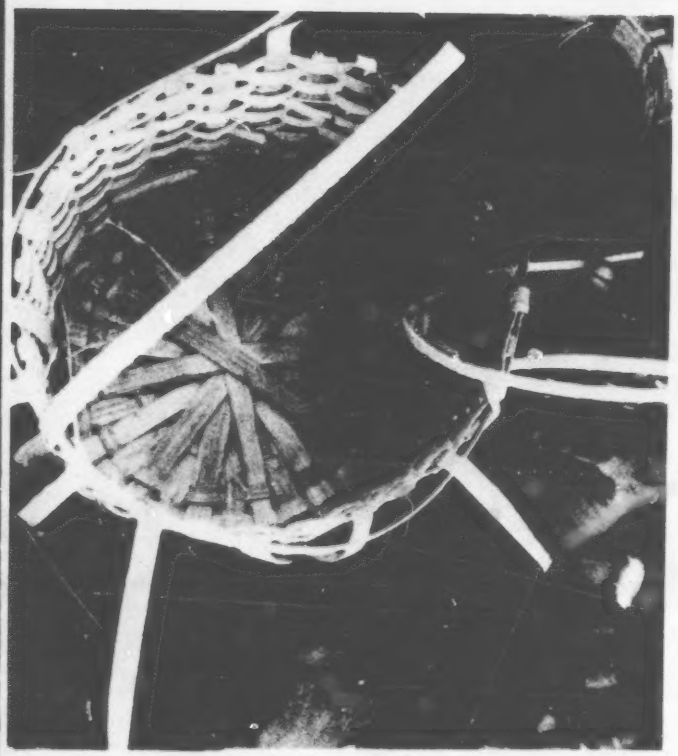


The top is reinforced with another strip, and the vertical strips are turned down to hold the reinforcing strip in place. Finally, the vertical strips are woven into the basket.



The handle, which is made from much heavier oak, is woven into the sides.

The finishing touch—completing the rim and making sure everything is tight—makes a basket of good quality.

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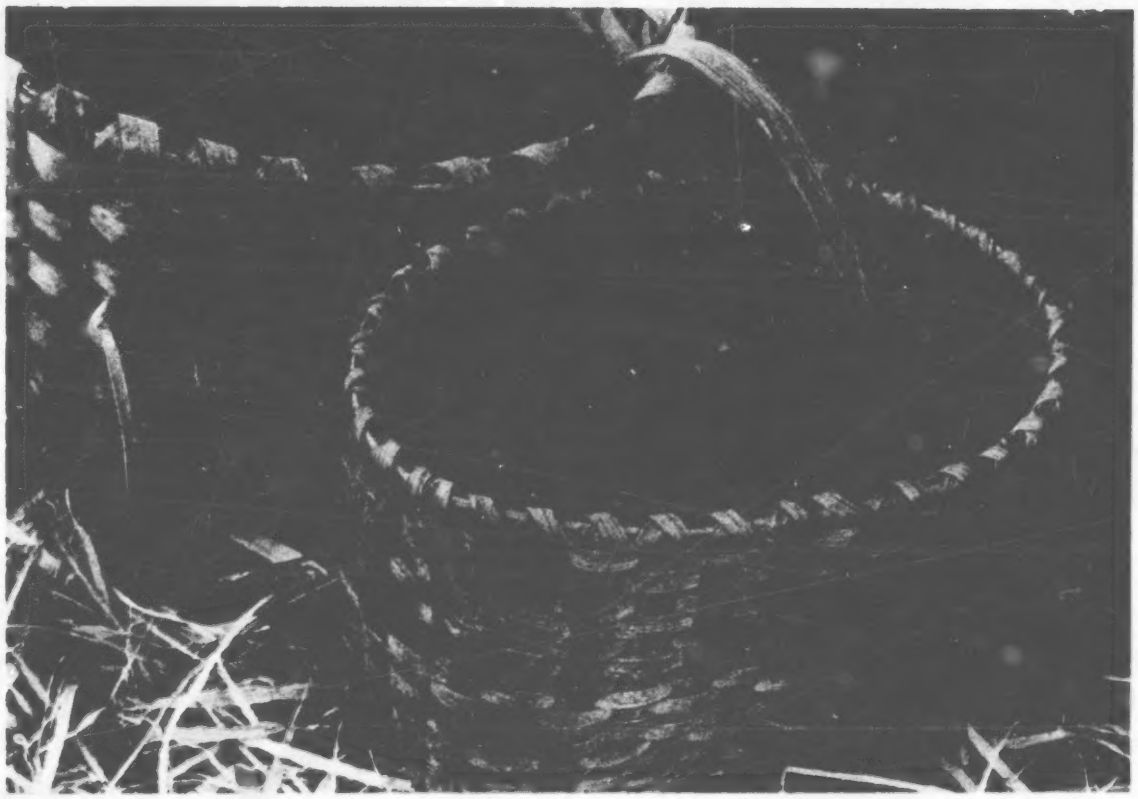

Finished baskets are shown here, along with others soon to be completed.

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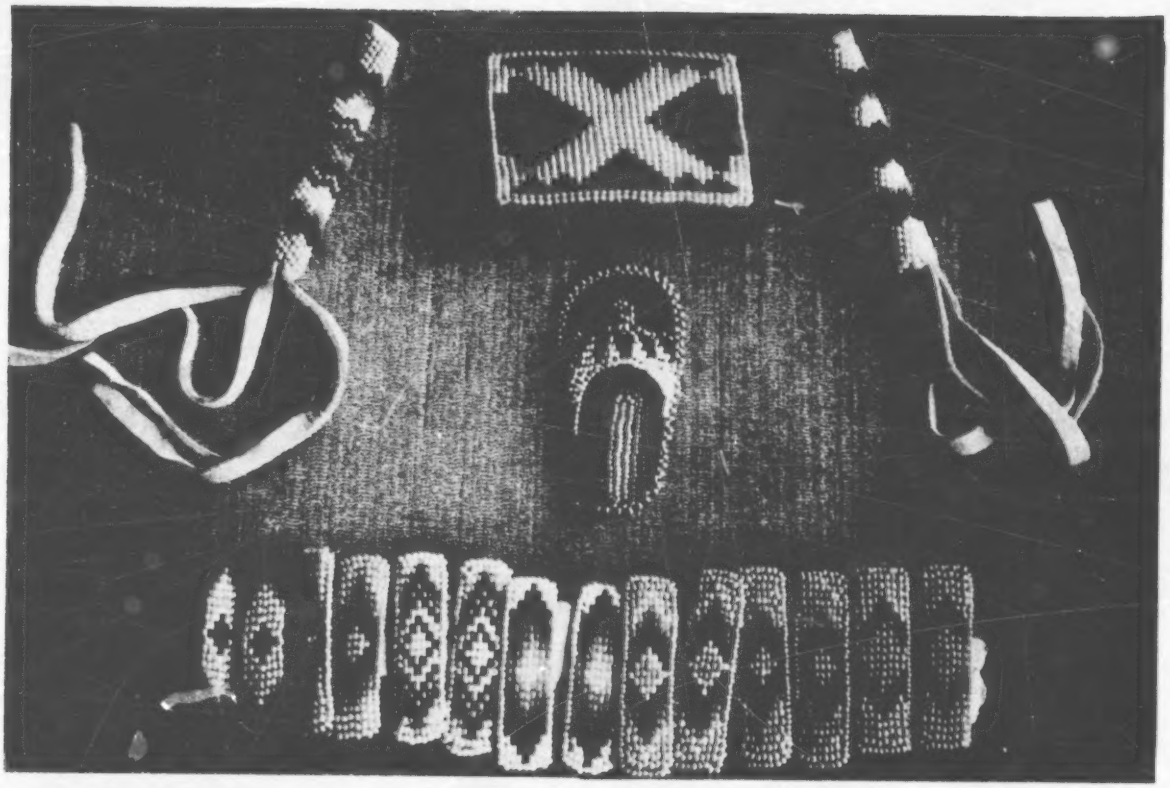
Beading



Thallis and Jane Lewis are mother and daughter. Some of Thallis' work was given to a Mississippi State Senator, Thad Cochran, as a gift by the Choctaw tribal chief. Jane did all the beadwork for her own Choctaw dress. They both grew up and went to school in the Bogue Chitto Community. Thallis has graduated from college and is currently the director of the Choctaw Bilingual Education Training Program. Jane is in the eleventh grade at Choctaw Central High School.

WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO BEAD?

Thallis: Nobody really did teach me how to do beadwork. I got interested in it when I saw the older people doing it. Community people came to the schools and showed us how. I just watched them a lot of the times doing the beadwork and from there I just taught myself.

Jane: My mom taught me, so that I can carry on and teach it to young kids.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU LEARNED HOW TO DO BEADWORK?

Thallis: When I got interested in it and learned how to do beadwork, I was around 18 years old.

Jane: I was about 10 when I started, so it took years, I guess, learning to do the basic stuff, but I am still learning.

HAVE YOU TAUGHT ANYONE?

Thallis: Yes, I've done several in-service workshops for the community and for parents. Also, I've done some at Head Start meetings to train the staff.

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HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO MAKE DIFFERENT THINGS?

Thallis: If it is a choker, it usually takes me about two hours every evening for about two weeks to make one. If I am going to make a bolo tie, it usually takes me about three weeks because it takes a lot of beads.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO MAKE EARRINGS?

Jane: I can finish one in about an hour or two.

HOW DO PEOPLE USE THE BEADWORK THAT YOU MAKE?

Thallis: Around the reservation, a lot of people want some during the spring festival, where the children use them for the traditional dances. And during The Choctaw fair the community dancers also want beads.

DO YOU MAKE ANYTHING THAT IS USED JUST FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS OR CAN PEOPLE CAN WEAR BEADS ANYTIME?

Jane: People can wear them anytime.

DO YOU PREFER ANY CERTAIN COLORS TO WORK WITH?

Thallis: I am known for using rainbow colors, red, light red, dark red, orange, yellow, black, brown, and white.

HOW MUCH DO THE DIFFERENT ITEMS COST?

Thallis: It's according to how long it takes and how many beads it takes, so they are different prices. Just a regular necklace will cost about $20.00. A bolo tie will be around $30.00, and a medallion necklace would cost around $12.00. It takes a long time, and lots of concentration, to put the colors where they go and to figure out a design.

Jane: The whole set for a dress, with everything the same color, will probably be about $200.00.

ARE THE BEADS EXPENSIVE?

Jane: Nowadays they are.

HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED FOR THE CHOCTAWS SINCE YOU WERE A CHILD?

Thallis: I could say lots of things have changed. Back then, most of our parents were sharecroppers, and now most of them are educated and working different places—in offices and factories.

Jane: There are new buildings and less trees. I think it is better because more pople have jobs and hope for a better life.

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, DID YOUR PARENTS HAVE A LOT OF RULES YOU HAD TO LIVE BY?

Thallis: Especially my father had a lot of rules to go by. Now he is dead and gone, and now I can see why he did that for me. I guess I was still young and didn't understand—I thought he just didn't like me, or didn't want me, but now I look back and I appreciate what he was trying to do for me.

WERE THERE DIFFERENT RULES FOR BOYS AND GIRLS?

Thallis: No, we all had the same rules. The only thing he changed, was about going to school. Three of us did go to school and got out with a high school education. That was the one rule that he did change.

DO YOU HAVE SPECIAL RULES BECAUSE YOU ARE A WOMAN?

Jane: Yes, I think it's because I am a woman. I have to come home and all that.

ARE THERE SOME THINGS THAT ARE ONLY TO BE DONE BY A MAN?

Thallis: I don't think so. If a woman knows how to make ball sticks, they can do that. If a man learns how to do beadwork, they can do it.

DO YOU KNOW IF THE BIA OR STATE OF MISSISSIPPI EVER TRIED TO STOP CHOCTAWS FROM PRACTICING TRIBAL TRADITIONS?

Thallis: The only thing that I can say is that when I was in school, we were not allowed to speak our language; we were to speak only English when I was a beginner in school.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CHOCTAW USED BEFORE THEY HAD THESE BEADS?

Jane: Animal teeth and bones were used for beading, and they made arrowheads out of rocks.

Thallis: I have used chinaberries, and I understand Choctaws have always used them.

WHO IS THE CHOCTAW PERSON THAT YOU THINK DOES THE BEST BEADWORK?

Thallis: That is hard to say. I probably would say I have an eye on one person in the Bogue Chitto area and her name is Arrah Willis. I have been watching her a long time. There is another lady from that community and her name is Effie Joe. She and her girls do beadwork.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING TO MAKE?

Jane: Really, it's headbands. I like to do those.

WOULD YOU MAKE IT EVEN IF YOU COULDN'T SELL IT?

Jane: Yes, I think so, just to keep it.

WHY DO YOU DO THE BEADWORK? WOULD YOU DO IT IF THERE WAS NO ONE TO BUY IT?

Thallis: Yes, because when I started I didn't think that people were going to buy it. I just thought that we need to keep this as a Choctaw tradition—that was my main thing.

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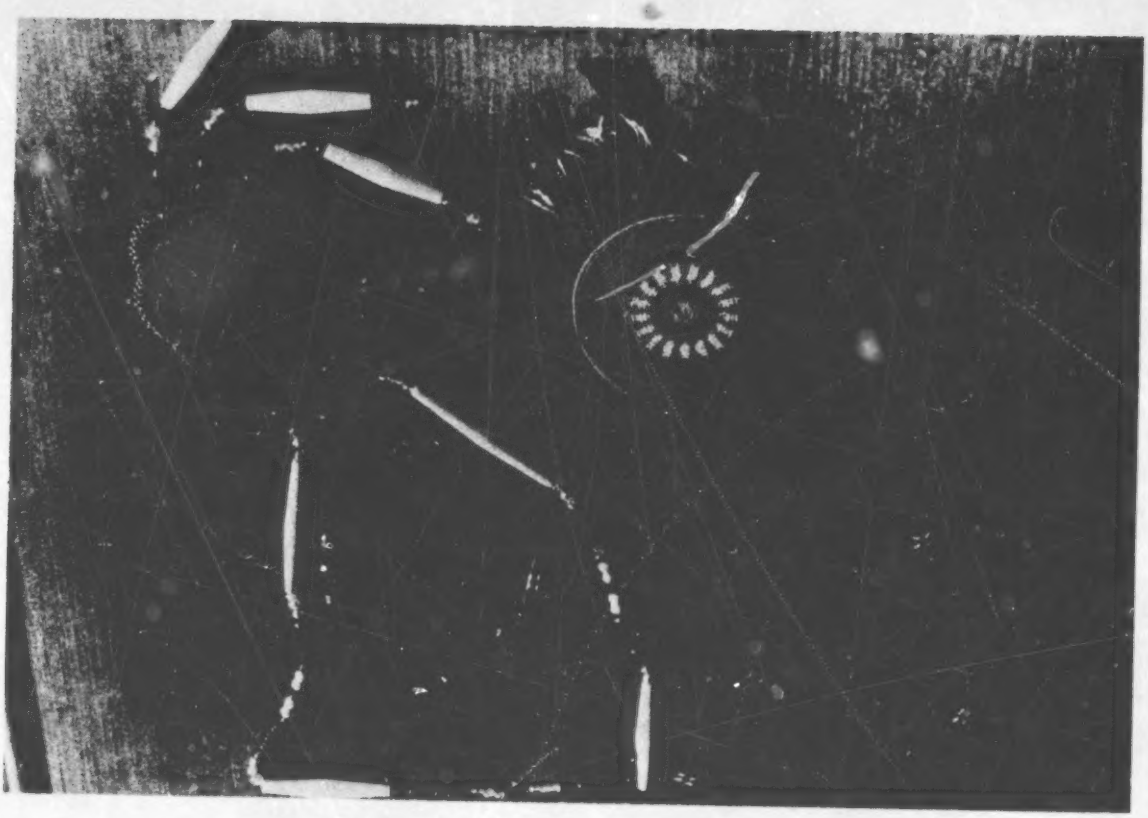

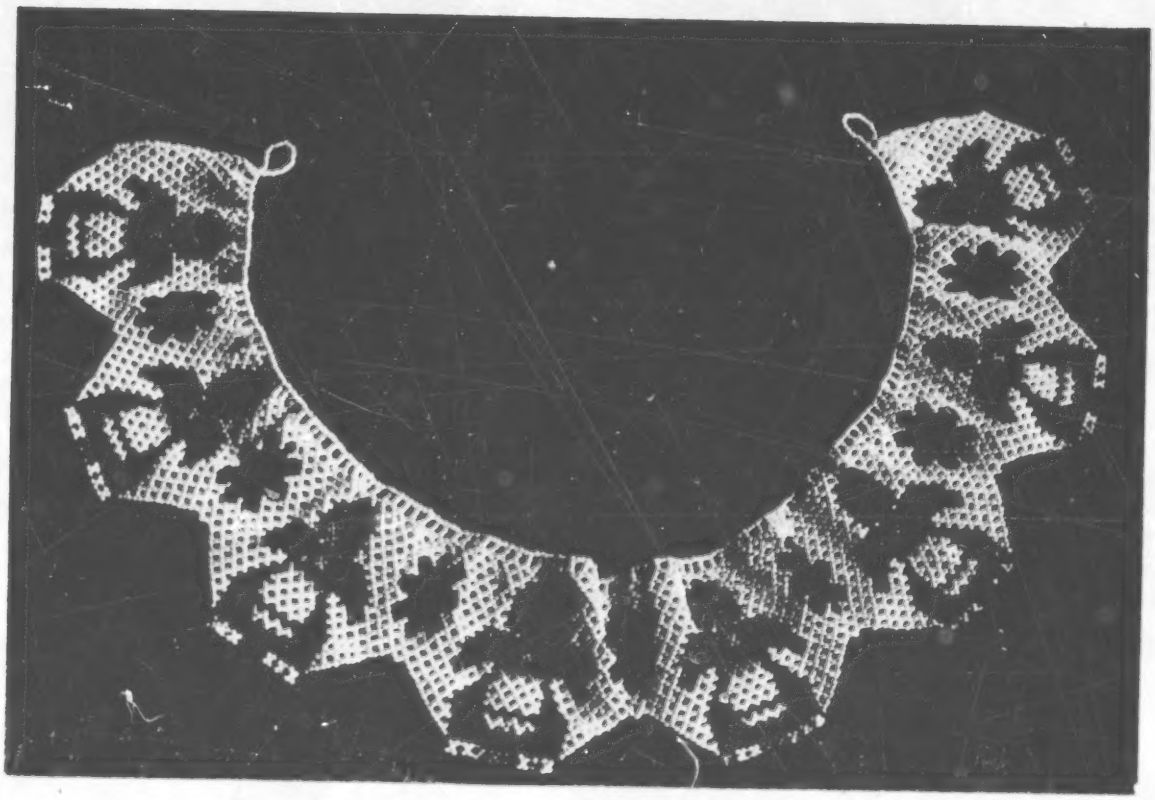

Pictured are a few examples of some of the different items beaded by Thallis and Jane.

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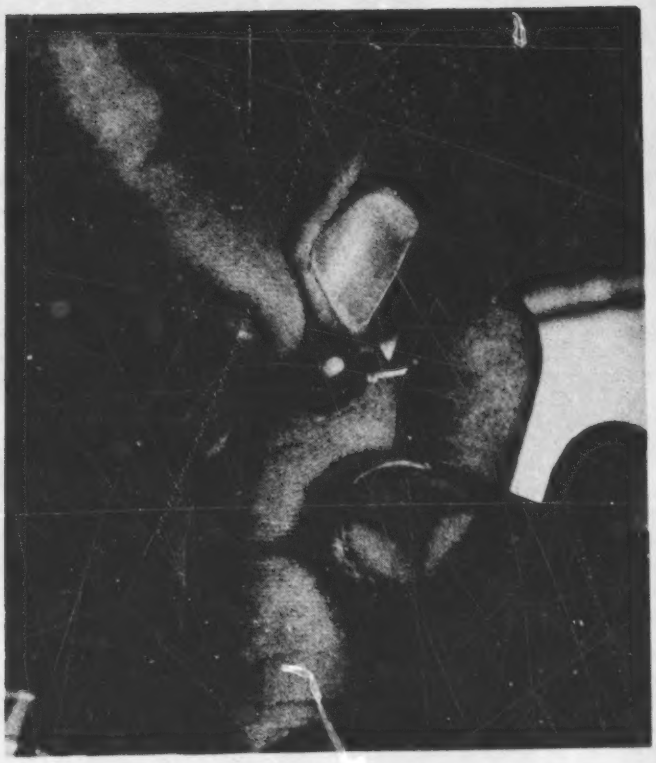
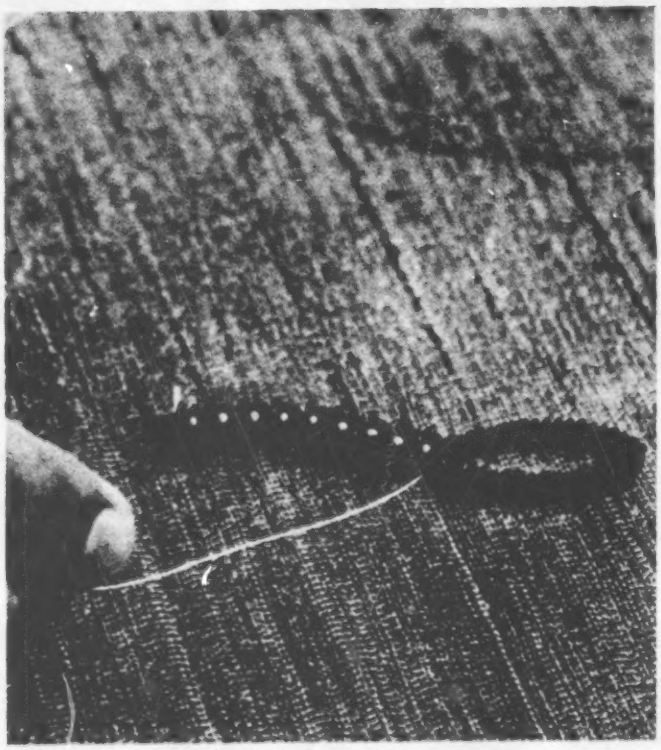
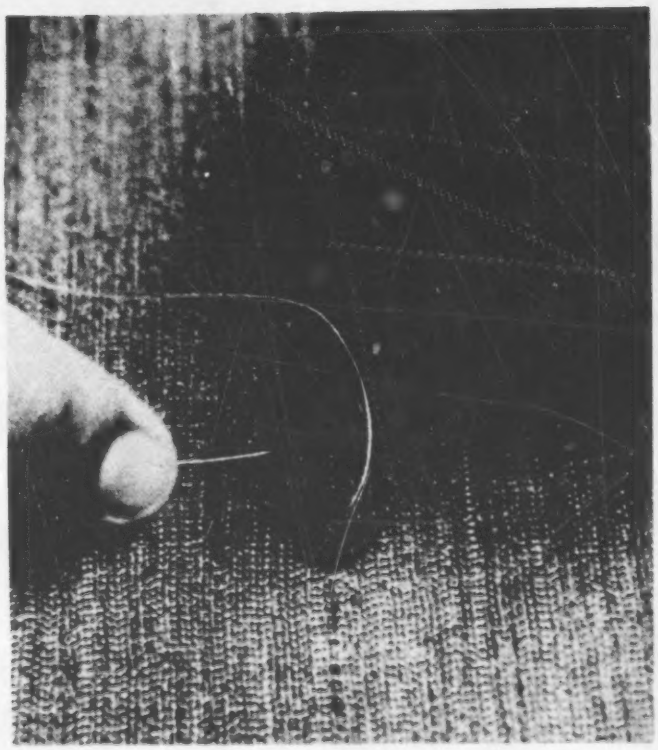
Jane starts out with a knot, and she strings eight beads as the first step in making a daisy chain.



A different-colored bead is put in the center.



Any number of daisies can be strung together, forming a daisy chain. (See the medallion previously pictured.)



Next, Jane adds beads forming a loop about one inch long. The exact length is not crucial to the construction of the daisy chain.

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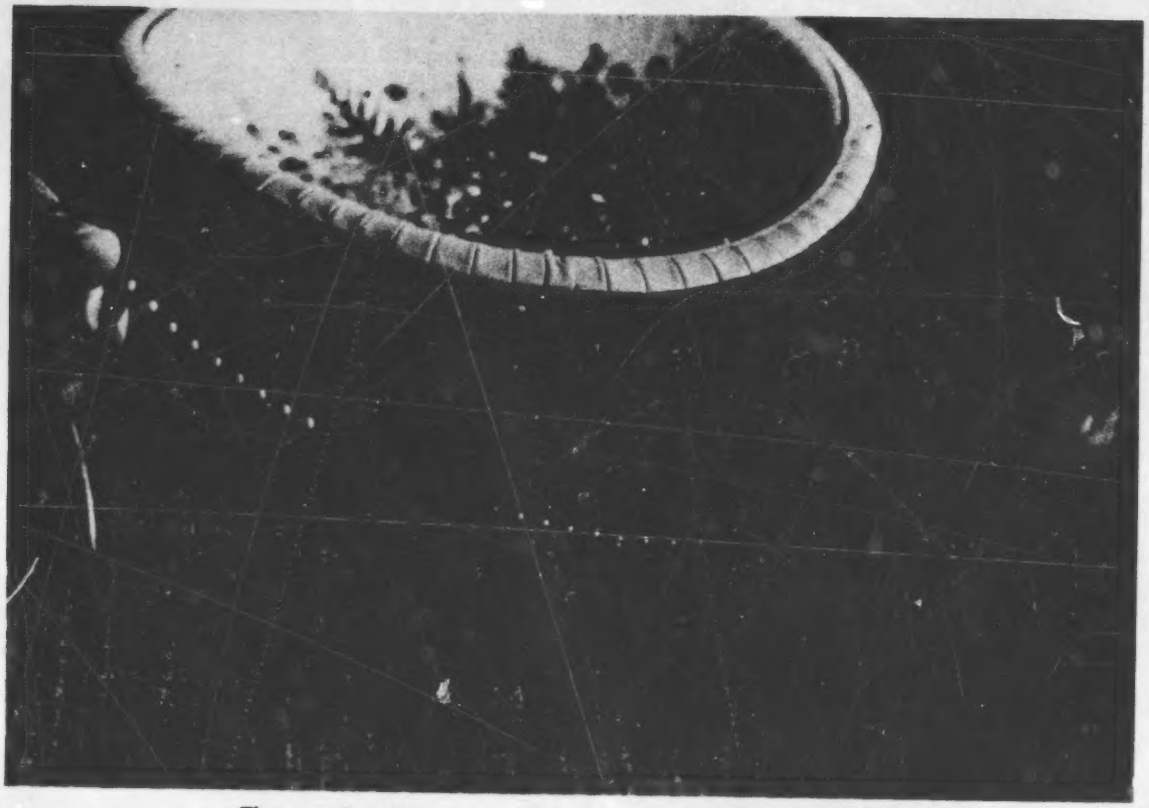

Then, another daisy chain is attached. This process goes on until the desired length is reached. In the above picture, Jane is making a choker.

In the above picture, Thallis gives Jane some help in securing the clasp.

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Thallis is shown holding a necklace, the design for which she created herself.

Here Thallis is wearing the final product.

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Clothing

Nettie Tubby works as a Housekeeping Group Leader at the Choctaw Health Center. She also enjoys sewing Choctaw clothing. She was born and raised in the Red Water community in Leake County, Mississippi. Nettie received her GED in 1978 from the Choctaw Adult Education Program. The Choctaw used to make all of their own clothes. Now, the clothes that Nettie makes are worn usually on special occasions, like the Choctaw Fair or school programs.

WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO DO THIS?

My mother—because I wanted to make a Choctaw dress. I loved to look at her Choctaw dresses after she sewed them. I loved to wear that kind of dress, so I asked her to teach me, and she taught me how to do it.

HOW OLD WERE YOU?

I am 62 years old. I was about 14 years old when I first started to sew a Choctaw dress.

HAVE YOU TAUGHT ANYONE ELSE HOW TO MAKE A CHOCTAW DRESS?

Yes, my sister. My sister was about 13 years old. She is way yonger than me, because I think she is around 40 or 50 now.

DO YOU KNOW OTHER PEOPLE WHO MAKE THEIR CHOCTAW DRESSES AND SHIRTS?

Oh yes, there are quite a few people making Choctaw dresses and shirts.

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IF SOMEONE WERE TO ASK YOU WHO SEWS THE BEST, HOW WOULD YOU DECIDE?

The hand stitching is the first and most important thing. A long time ago, Choctaws didn't have sewing machines and they had to sew by hand. Hand sewing is a lot better than running it through a machine.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE A DRESS?

It depends on how old the person is. I am making a dress for an eight-year-old girl, and it will take me a week. It just takes time because you are going to have to measure them. If I am going to sit here and sew eight hours a day, it might take me about three days to finish this. But I can't sit up in one place that long.

DID OLD PEOPLE EVER TELL YOU ABOUT WHEN CHOCTAWS STARTED TO MAKE THE DRESSES?

Only my mother's mother. She used to wear a Choctaw dress, but I don't know when she started to wear the Choctaw dress. I have seen her mother's picture and she was wearing a Choctaw dress; that has been a long time ago, and my grandmother was over 100 years old when she passed away.

DID YOUR PARENTS HAVE A FARM?

Yes, we used to farm. We grew sweet potatoes, field peas, corn, and we used to raise cotton, too. We used to have cows, hogs, and mules.

WHEN THE CROPS CAME IN, DID YOU EVER TRADE WITH OTHER PEOPLE?

Yes, we used to sell corn, not all of it, but we'd sell maybe half of it and buy flour, sugar, and coffee because we used to have our own lard and meat.

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER, DID YOUR FAMILY HAVE ANY CONTACTS WITH THE LOCAL BLACKS?

No, that is one thing they didn't do a long time ago. Now these days they do that. Well, they used to work together but that is about all they used to do—work in the field and pick cotton.

DO YOU REMEMBER PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT THE CHOCTAWS THAT WENT TO OKLAHOMA?

My grandmother's sister moved to Oklahoma at the time of the removal. My grandmother used to tell us that her sister was going to Oklahoma. She told her that this land in Oklahoma would be given to the Choctaws. I am pretty sure she had land after she moved to Oklahoma. I think she died in Oklahoma.

DO ONLY WOMEN MAKE THE DRESSES AND SHIRTS?

Yes, I think so; I never did hear of, or see, a man sewing a shirt.

ARE THERE SOME OTHER THINGS THAT ONLY WOMEN ARE SUPPOSED TO DO?

Women are not supposed to plow the fields, but there are a lot of women who can plow. In the Choctaw way women don't plow fields.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR MATERIALS?

I go to the fabric store and pick out the best material. I usually use cotton, but I can make them with polyester but not wool or anything like that. I always try to get a material that won't fade.

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DO YOU USE A PATTERN TO MAKE THE CLOTHING?

No, I have to measure the person that I am going to make a dress for, or if they have an old dress I can go by that old dress. If they don't, I have to measure them around the waist, chest, arm and length.

AFTER YOU MEASURE THEM, WHAT DO YOU DO NEXT?

After I cut it up, I start with the bottom of the skirt. After I finish the bottom ruffles, I put them together with this skirt and start trimming. Sometimes I start with the chest, but I usually start with the skirt.

WHEN YOU ARE MAKING THE TRIM, WHAT DO YOU PUT DOWN FIRST?

The line goes down first, then the diamonds, and then I put the line on top.

HOW DO YOU MAKE THE DIAMOND?

First you measure how long a piece of ribbon you need, then cut through the ribbon almost halfway on both sides about every half inch. Then, lay it down on the dress and fold the ribbon so it looks like a diamond. You have to sew each side of the diamond separately.

AND THE DESIGN IS ALL HAND SEWN?

Yes, this is all hand sewn, and it looks different when it's machine sewn.

HOW IS THE BACK OF THE DRESS HELD TOGETHER?

I was going to put buttons on this. Just recently a lot of Choctaw put hooks, and sometimes they put a zipper. But I can remember good that my grandmother used to take a piece of cardboard and cut a piece of material and put it on top of this cardboard, and she would make a button out of cardboard. And she would just stitch the cardboard button to the material because maybe she couldn't afford a button, I don't know, but she used to make buttons out of cardboard.

HOW MUCH WOULD A DRESS LIKE THAT COST?

I don't know. I usually make dresses for my daughters and granddaughters, and sometimes I just furnish my own material and give it to them. But a lot of people say it is about $30.00 or $35.00, but I don't know how much they sell it for now.

HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED FOR CHOCTAWS SINCE YOU WERE A CHILD?

Well, I can say that it has changed a lot, because at the time the BIA used to let us have a pair of shoes, a sweater, cloth, socks, hose, and so like that, to wear to school. Now, these days the kids have a good chance to get a good education. We used to couldn't go out and go to a White ball game. They wouldn't let us go at that time. Now they can go to White school and play ball with them, football and basketball.

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Nettie points out the detail of her sewing. This little girl's dress is the same style as a woman's dress.

First, a piece of cardboard about three-quarters-of-an-inch wide is used to cut a ribbon of cotton cloth. The cloth is folded in half to make the cuts uniform.

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Nettie decides where to place the cloth and starts her first diamond. The sides are folded under and usually three or four stitches are used per side.

After the first diamond is finished, Nettie works on the top all the way down the row.

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The line of cloth above and below the diamonds is also hand sewn in a similar fashion.

Next, Nettie works her way back down the row.

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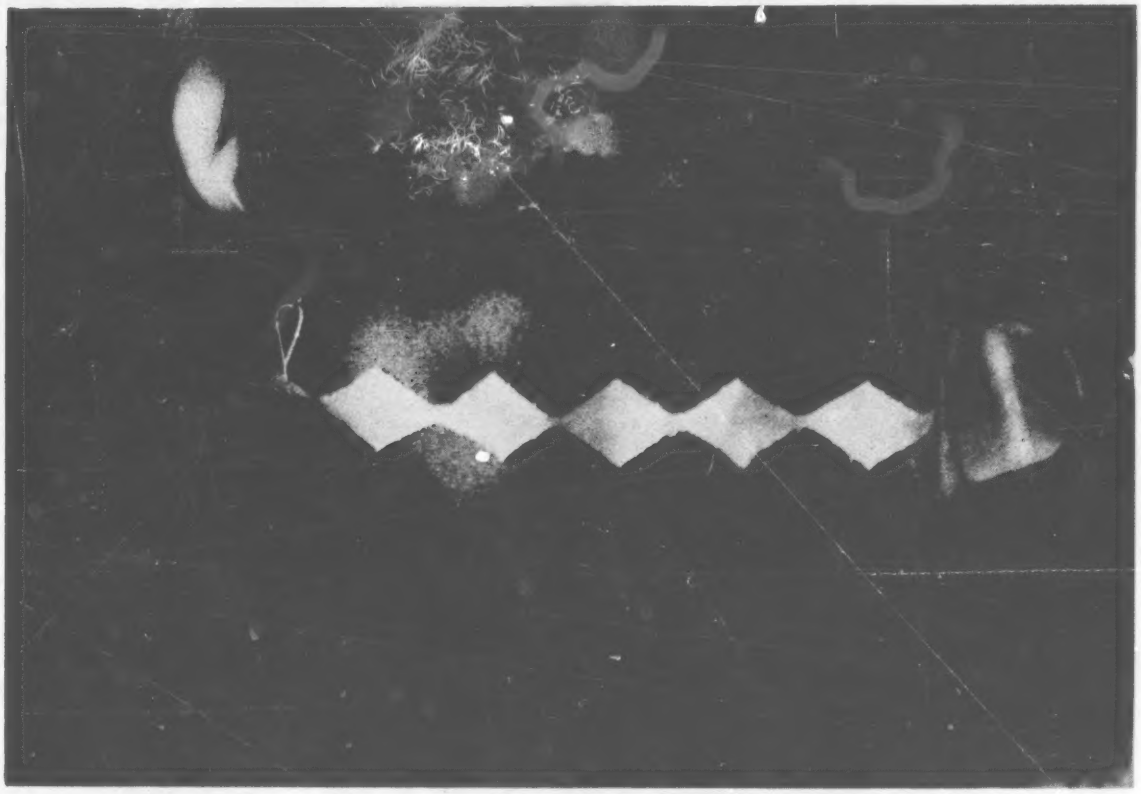

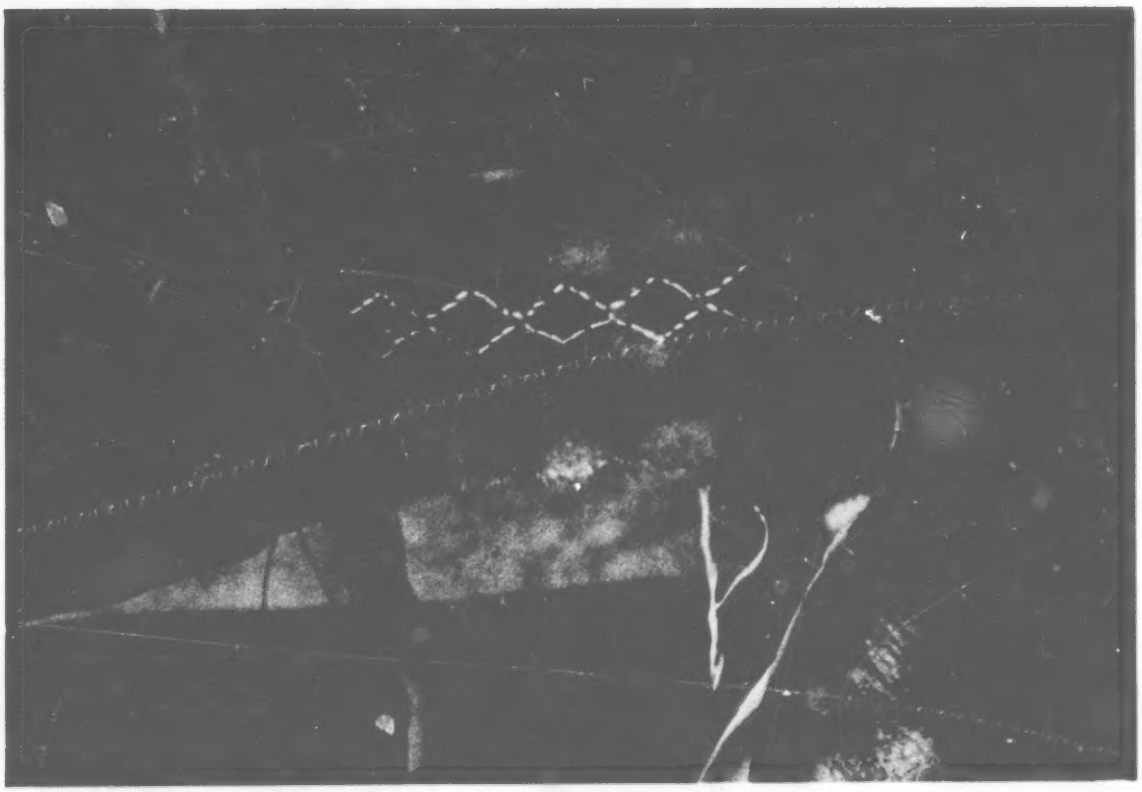

Here is a front and back view of a finished row of diamonds.

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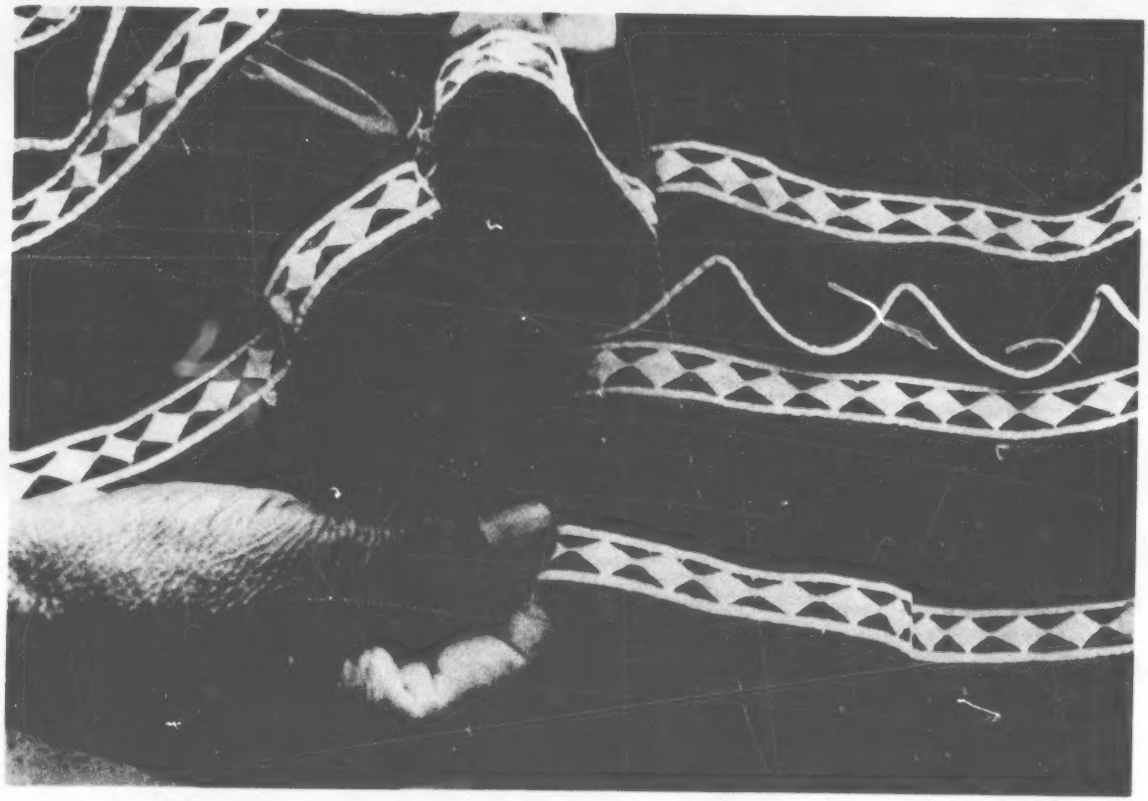

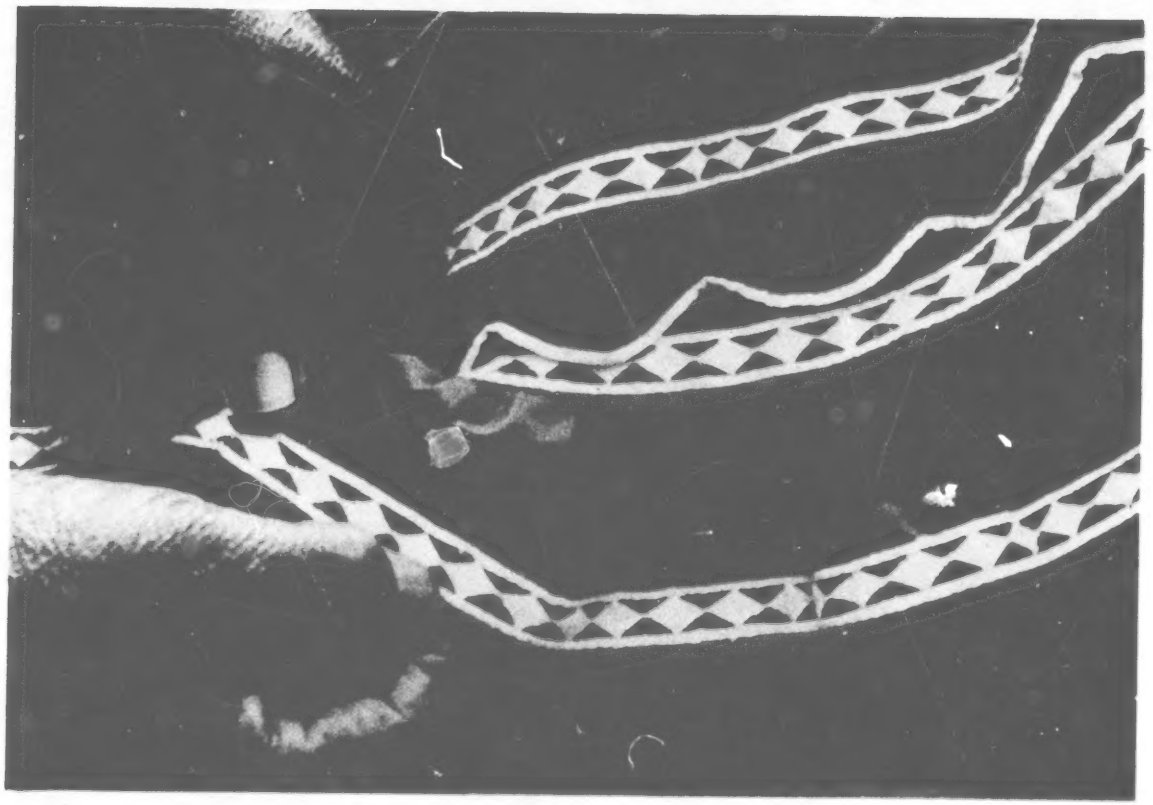

The most common design is the diamond. Choctaw clothes are usually made of a solid bright color but can be made from other fabrics and with patterned material.

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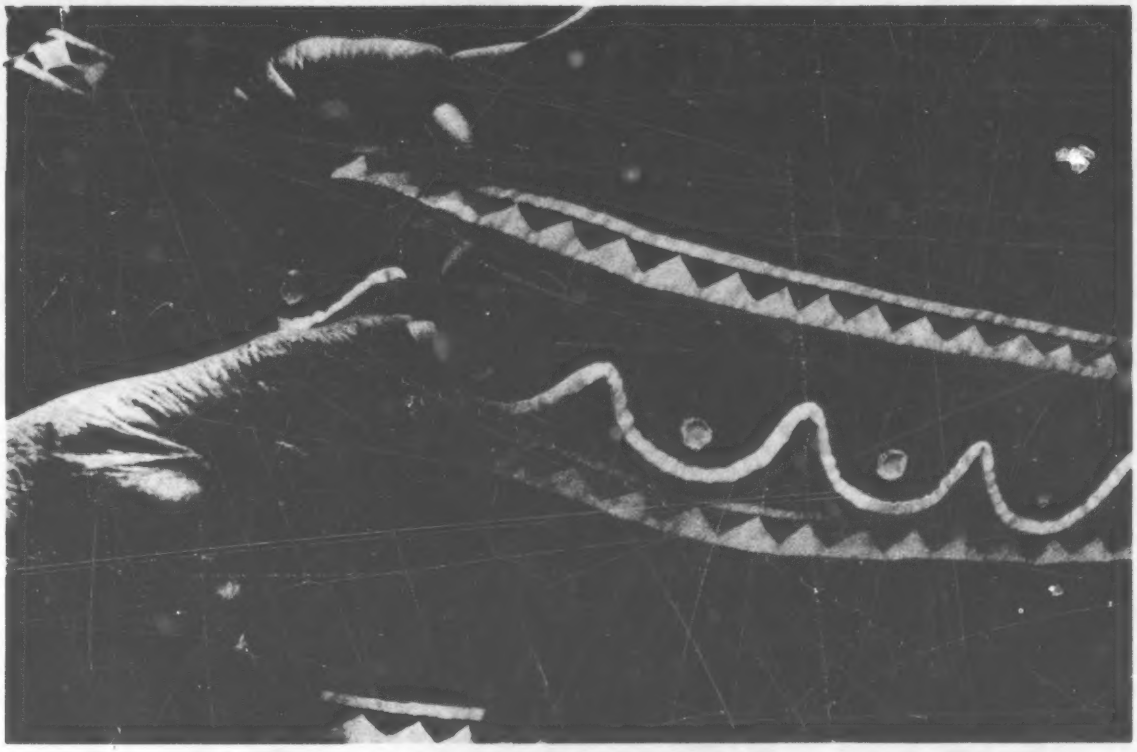

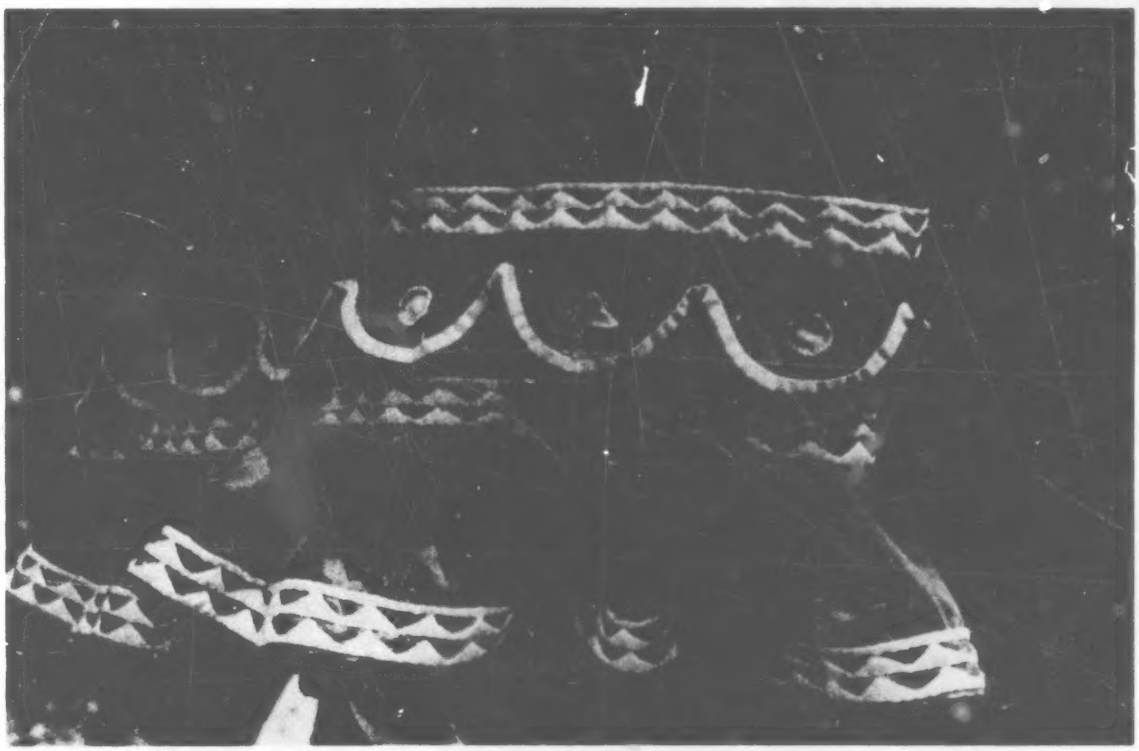

The sun design and the double *tipi* (tepee).

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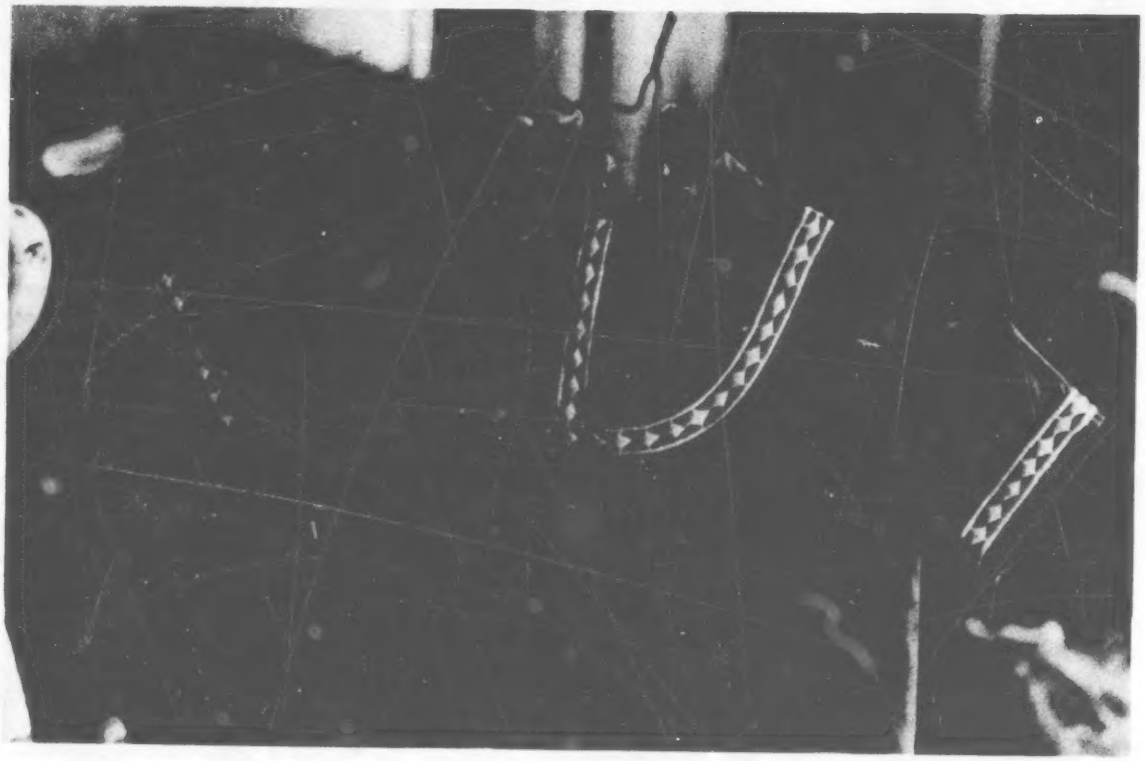

A little boy 's shirt ready for her grandson to wear.

Choctaw Social Dancers at the Annual Choctaw Fair showing several styles of sewing.

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